

History of the Vacaville Fire Department

BY C.E. MC DANIEL

PREFACE

This project is a direct result of the desire of Fire Chief Robert A. Powell, the fourth paid Fire Chief of the Vacaville Fire Department, to have accumulated in one place the most accurate and complete history of the Department possible.

Several sources of information were used in researching this work. The majority of the information came, however, from three sources: Vacaville's history book entitled "Vacaville, the Heritage of a California Community" by Ronald H. Limbaugh and Walter A. Payne, published in 1978; microfilmed copies of the Vacaville Reporter from 1883 to the present; and minutes of the Fire Department meetings, which date back to 1902.

The reader should keep two points in mind. The author is not a professional researcher or writer, but merely a citizen of Vacaville extremely interested in the Town's past events and the men who cared enough about their community to take part in its protection. Because of this, there may at times appear to be contradictions in the text.

The second point is that a great deal of the information came from written accounts that may be somewhat biased by the writer's view of the situation. History,

like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. The aforementioned book has been found to be inaccurate on occasion in its description of events that took place after 1963. Therefore, we can assume that mistakes were also made, unintentionally, in accounts of previous years. These statements illustrate that the longer one goes without keeping an up-to-date, factual record of historical events, the more difficult it is to be accurate.

This is the situation Chief Powell is trying to avoid in the future in authorizing this work.

CHAPTER ONE

1850 - 1890

The City of Vacaville was founded in 1851 when Juan Manuel Vaca sold nine square miles of land to William McDaniel for \$3,000, with the agreement that on any one square mile of land McDaniel would lay out a town; that it would be named Vacaville; and approximately half the lots would be deeded back to Vaca. By December 13, 1851, the town had been surveyed and a map filed with Solano County officials. This map indicates that north-south streets would all bear Spanish names and the east-west streets would be numbered in Spanish. Apparently McDaniel and his partner in the venture, Lansing Mizner, either had no intention of following this plan or later lost control of the situation. The only resemblance between this map and the way the town actually developed was the site. McDaniel constructed the first building, which was shortly followed by a hotel of sorts and then a store. This was the modest beginning of the Town of Vacaville. The town grew slowly and sometimes painfully. By June of 1880, the population totaled 361 in the village and another 938 within the township.

Fires undoubtedly occurred while this growth was taking place, but the blazes were probably limited to single structures. However, this changed in 1877. In June and

again in October, fires heavily damaged the business district.

The Weekly Solano Republican reported that on June 5, 1877, a fire broke out in the barn of Mrs. Luzena Wilson on the southwestern edge of town. Flying brands ignited the Methodist Church, a quarter of a mile away. The fire engulfed buildings from the blacksmith shop to "the bridge," apparently referring to the present-day corner of Main and Bernard to the Ulatis Creek bridge or Main and Dobbins to the bridge. Damage was estimated at \$54,000. The cause of the fire remains unknown although there were suspicions cast at some "tramps," along with a rumor that "a band of Gypsies told several parties the day before that a fire would break out in the barn and sweep the town." By the end of June most of the businessmen and women had set about re-building their properties and re-stocking merchandise. But, on October 10, just four months later, disaster struck again. A fire started at 2 a.m. in a barn in the center of town and this time the destruction was nearly total. Losses were estimated at \$250,000.

Many people had been insured, at least partially, for the first fire but few continued to carry insurance and consequently

suffered total losses. One exception was Druggist A.W. Vance who was over-insured. As a result he was arrested and investigated on arson charges but released for lack of evidence.

The cause of the fire was never discovered but one thing is certain--even after being in existence for some 25 years, Vacaville had no organized fire protection and very little equipment to fight fires. These fires might have spelled the end of Vacaville had it not been for the opening of the Vaca Valley Railroad line and the fruit boom of the 1870s. It was not unusual for towns to rebuild--as San Francisco and Vacaville did--three or four times following conflagrations. Nor, was it unusual to give up, as Elmira did, after the second or third burning.

There are indications in the Limbaugh-Payne book that in July of 1880, the women of Vacaville initiated a subscription drive to purchase some extinguishers. By August they had raised enough money to buy six Babcock extinguishers, so the men could form a hook and ladder company. It's unknown what became of this company. Did it die out for lack of interest?

As early as 1883, the Vacaville

Reporter often mentioned the need to form a Fire Company. So what happened to the hook and ladder company? In describing the fire of November 8, 1888, J.D. McLain, who owned and operated The Reporter, made the following statement: "The scene was appalling in the extreme although everybody did everything they could to save property, they were entirely helpless. As there was no fire department or apparatus to check the flames in the onset, and owing to the fact there was a strong north wind blowing at the time, which drove everyone from the path the flames pursued."

In 1886 he wrote that 8 of the 24 buckets belonging to the Fire Department and some hooks and ladders were found. In the November 29, 1888, edition he mentioned that George Crystal, chief of the Fire Department, attended a town trustees' meeting, but nothing was said about how or why Mr. Crystal became Fire Chief or where the Fire Department originated.

There were two large fires in 1888. The first in August burned a number of Chinese dwellings. Even more destructive was the fire on November 8, which again ruined the business district causing some \$200,000 damage. This fire started in Daniel Corn's livery stable just after midnight and

was allegedly caused by another mysterious arsonist.

Vacaville was not the only town in Solano County to be hard hit by fire in this decade. Dixon, Elmira, and Suisun were also victims of large fires. Suisun's fire in 1888 caused more than \$1,000,000 in damages. Insurance rates to Suisun and other towns in Solano County were raised 50 percent because of their defenseless condition, but somehow Vacaville was not included in the increase. This probably accounts for the lack of interest shown in establishing fire protection for the village until early spring of 1890.

On March 13, 1890, Nathan Holt and James M. Miller displayed a new fire cart at Blum's Store. A barrel had been mounted on two light wheels so that it was within eight inches of the ground. The cart was modeled after a spraying pump apparatus with a short tongue enabling two men to pull. A rope could be attached in the event of fire, so that a dozen men could pull it for greater speed. The barrel was to contain salt water which they thought would form a coating, making a perfect resistance to fire. The cost of the units would not exceed \$60 and the designers hoped to raise enough funds to assign four at strategic locations around town.

Had Vacaville finally solved its fire protection problems? Not quite! On March 22, Norman Baker noticed smoke coming from the roof of the Old Corner Saloon and yelled the alarm. Myer Blum grabbed the cart and rushed to the scene. Unfortunately, he did not notice the barrel was empty. Nathan Holt had dumped it the day before to paint it.

The Reporter felt that at future fires Myer would become a distinguished auxiliary to the Fire Department of Vacaville, but hoped that the machine would play no more tricks on him. In Mr. Blum's defense, we should also note that he has not been the only person to respond to a fire without water in the tank--only the first.

On August 15, a benefit dance was held to purchase hose and hose carts for the Volunteer Fire Company. Tickets for the dance, which included supper, were \$2.50 per couple. A large contingent from Dixon attended, and \$150 was cleared.

Barely two weeks later, August 28, 1890, disaster struck Vacaville again when five more buildings in the business district went up in smoke. Arson was again suspected as the fire started in the lower part of Chapman's Harness Shop and no

one was known to be in that part of the building since six o'clock the previous evening. The fire caused at least \$10,000 damage at first estimate but could have been much worse. This was one of those rare nights when hardly any wind was blowing.

In spite of the fact that water supply was limited because workmen had left the water main unplugged, they did manage to wet down some of the buildings before the suction on a pump failed. The reason given for several openings left in the line was that no one expected a fire to occur!

The Vacaville Reporter also stated in its report of the fire "the celebrated forced pump with barrel for chemically prepared water constructed some time ago by those great Fire Chiefs Nathan Holt and J.M. Miller was not brought into requisition. We presume the barrel was in about the same condition for holding water that a barley sack would have been." The ashes from this fire were barely cooled when another fire struck just two weeks later. Apparently three more buildings were lost or damaged to the tune of another \$15,000. These two fires, plus rumors that insurance rates were to be raised a whopping 50 to 200 percent, finally aroused the citizens to take action in

establishing adequate fire protection.

On September 15, 1890, William Hill called a mass meeting of the citizens of Vacaville to form a Hose Company. Scores of leading citizens attended. After Hill summarized the object of the meeting, A.M. Stevenson was chosen chairman and H.D. Chandler, secretary of the meeting. William Hill read the following resolution:

"Resolved, that the following named citizens be designated as Charter members of said company to wit: Nathan Holt, Charles Bradley, Al Boles, W.C. Donaho, John Bailey, J.W. Kennedy, John Burns, F.H. Hacke, F.C. Chapman, J.M. Miller, J.P. Clayton, Joseph Frost, G. L. Parker, N. Nelson, Charles Riley, George Harley, and that they are empowered and instructed to forthwith proceed to complete said organization, elect their officers, solicit members, and do whatever necessary in their wisdom that may be considered for the best interest of the town in the matter of protection against and fighting of fires. We hereby pledge ourselves to assist in the success of the same, either in contributions of money or otherwise, when called upon."

On motion by Raleigh Barcar the resolution was adopted and the

company named the "Vacaville Hose Company".

A motion was made by J.W. Stith that a committee for five be appointed to raise funds for the Company and to confer with the Water Company on turning the hose over to the Company. Appointed to the committee were W.D. Parker, D.K. Corn, F.H. Buck, W.H. Hill, and F.H. Hacke. It took the committee only minutes to report that the sum of \$305 had been pledged for the equipment. The meeting was declared closed and the groundwork was laid for the first established fire department for the Town of Vacaville.

Final organization of the Company was completed the following evening. The charter members met September 16, 1890, and elected the following officers: W.C. Donaho, president; H.D. Chandler, secretary; J.M. Miller, treasurer; Nathan Holt, foreman; Charles Bradley, first assistant foreman, and J.W. Kennedy, second assistant foreman.

A committee of four was appointed to draft bylaws for the governing of the company and was to report back the following Friday. Members of the committee were F.H. Buck, J.P. Clayton, G.L. Parker, and J.W. Kennedy. That Friday, the Company was in full

attendance and new members were brought in. The first fire drill was held Saturday night, September 20, 1890.

So now, we finally have our first recognized and identifiable fire protection organization, even though it was not a part of city government as we know the fire department today. This was to come later after incorporation of the town. The problem now was; who should be the first fire chief?

Volunteer hose companies in those days were set up much like a business. They made their own rules, provided their own funds for equipment and ran their organization with little or no dependence on city government. In most cases the president, secretary, and treasurer ran the business of the company, with the foreman and assistant foreman providing the leadership necessary for the day-to-day tactical operation of the company. They were the persons in charge during firefighting operations, maintaining the equipment, scheduling, and conducting drills.

In order to state with any certainty who should be given this recognition, we would have to have a copy of the bylaws of the company. Unfortunately these bylaws have been lost, destroyed,

or misplaced. Arguments--or discussions if you prefer--could go on forever. All things considered, the author's choice for this honor is Nathan Holt, who was the elected foremen.

On September 22, one week after the town meeting to form the Company, President W.C. Donaho and Second Assistant Foreman J.W. Kennedy traveled to San Francisco to contract for the building of a hose cart. The specifications, published in The Reporter, were as follows:

"Frame of Norway and cold-rolled iron, forged and welded together; wheels, Sarven patent, 6' in diameter with steel tires; axles 1-5/8 Concord steel, loose collar with 5' track. Hose reel shall have a capacity of carrying 750' of rubber-lined or 500' of rubber hose and to run on box bearings set on axles. Two pipe holders for carrying playpipes. The holder on tol (sic) to have springs, 1 crowbar and holder, 1 pick head fire axe and holder. Two upright hose guards at rear of the frame to guide hose. An automatic gong to strike on each revolution of the wheel, a rope wheel and drag rope, polished hubs, hand grips and caps, hose roller at rear of frame and a tool box at the rear of the cart. A chain gear for winding the hose reel to the rear of the wheels on each side of the cart

with two handles provided for winding. The cart is to be handsomely painted and lettered with the initials of the Company on the tool box."

The cart was to be delivered in about six weeks. The delivery was made, but strangely enough, there was no announcement in the Vacaville Reporter of its arrival. However, references were made to it being used in drills by the volunteers before the first of the year. Apparently this cart was used until a motorized pumper was purchased by the City in 1916. The story of this acquisition is quite interesting and will be dealt with in detail in a later chapter.

So far we have a hose company, some hose and equipment on hand, a new hose cart ordered, and water mains with hydrants provided by the Vacaville Water Works to furnish fire protection. There was no fire alarm system to notify the Company's members when their services were needed and no building to house the equipment and serve as a meeting hall for the volunteers.

The first of these needs was taken care of in a matter of days. A large bell weighing some 700 pounds was owned by a rancher who happened to be a good friend of D.O. Clayton, a charter member

of the Hose Company. This bell originally adorned the belfry of the court house in Napa. When the building burned, the heat and subsequent fall to the ground cracked the bell. It was then sold at auction to a church in Monticello, a small town which now lies under water at Lake Berryessa. They transported it to their church and to their chagrin, found it to be too large for their belfry.

They in turn sold it to the rancher friend of Mr. Clayton. The rancher also found the bell to be unmanageable. Both his and Vacaville's problems were solved when he agreed to give the bell to Vacaville in exchange for an ordinary ranch bell. This was a pretty good deal in view of the fact that the bell originally cost \$1,500. It was immediately dubbed "Big Tom, the Loud Talker" by J.D. McLain, editor of the Vacaville Reporter.

By October 16, 1890, construction had started on a 20 foot belfry to house "Big Tom." Foreman Holt planned to enclose the belfry and use the space as a meeting hall. An addition to the Water Works engine house was to be made to store the hose cart. We don't know if these projects were completed or found to be unsuitable. The Company was making plans in February 1891 to raise money to

erect a hose cart house with meeting hall and to buy a bell to replace "Old Tom."

Vacaville had already suffered two large fires in this year of 1890, but a third was to come November 6, 1890. A large barn containing 250 tons of hay and located near the Depot broke out in flames. It quickly spread to Chandler's Lumber Yard, Miller's Hotel, and an unnamed store. These buildings were located in the present-day area of Bush and Depot streets. There is no mention of the hose cart being used but valiant efforts by volunteers and other citizens prevented several other buildings, including the Depot, from becoming involved. This fire was also believed to be incendiary and losses came to well over \$10,000.

By the 11th of December the Hose Company had completed plans for the first Firemen's Ball to take place December 19. Tickets were \$2 each, including supper, and the proceeds were used to help defray the cost of the hose. The cost is unknown but the Company cleared \$95 from the Ball.

With just three months existence the Vacaville Hose Company had come a long way. Since September 16, the members had elected their first fire chief, built a fire station of sorts, purchased the

first apparatus, added new hose and equipment, held their first fire drills (which seemed to take place at least every week), fought a large fire, and held the first Firemen's Ball.

It's surprising that it took so long to establish the fire protection that was so desperately needed and that the beginnings were so modest. The hose cart was a great improvement but hand pumpers, steam engines, and even motorized equipment were available in those days. As we will see, this established a trend that exists even today.

CHAPTER TWO

1891 - 1900

January 1891. The Vacaville Reporter stated there was little evidence of the four fires that severely damaged the town in just over three years. Actually, there were five fires, but since one was limited to not much more than the Chinese settlement, the editor apparently did not count it. A volunteer hose company was formed by some of the residents and there were 13 fire hydrants in place. The population of Solano County: 20,946. Of those, 2,712 lived in the Vacaville Township, with approximately 708 in the village.

By February, members of the company decided existing facilities for housing the hose cart and equipment were inadequate. "Big Tom the Loud Talker" apparently also had some shortcomings and would be replaced.

In order to finance these improvements, the Company staged a three-day Industrial Exposition and Museum at Platt's Hall on April 20-22. Citizens donated items to display in the museum section. Products and merchandise produced in Vacaville and vicinity were shown by the growers or manufacturers. A music and literary program was presented by local talent the first night, a baby contest took place on April 21, and minstrel

entertainment highlighted the last night. A "Homeliest Married Man" contest was part of this entertainment. Nathan Holt, Foreman of the Company was barely edged out by Oscar Garlich, another member of the Volunteer Company.

After paying expenses and paying off some past indebtedness, the Hose Company cleared about \$325. By today's standards, \$325 doesn't seem like a whole lot. You must remember, however, that we are talking about days when you could rent a five to six room house with barn and other out-buildings for as little as \$8 to \$10 a month! For a lot less than \$200, you could buy an acre of prime agricultural land. Compare that with what you would have to pay for an average-sized lot in town today.

By the end of the month members had decided that their new station would consist of two rooms for the cart and equipment and a 12' by 18' room in the back for a meeting hall. The building was located on the west side of Elizabeth Street between Main and Catherine Streets. The new fire bell was delivered in May and "Old Tom the Loud Talker" ("now Old Wheezie the Ex-Fire Bell") was shipped off to San Francisco.

It was a grand start for a grand organization, but it was not to

last. By October, The Reporter was chiding the members for their poor attendance at fire drills. Interest in fire protection was to subside until late 1894. The people had a lot of other things on their minds that claimed a great deal of attention. City incorporation was the main issue of the day. A horse-racing track and tennis club were being planned. There was no high school in Vacaville and a great deal of effort was being channeled in that direction to correct the situation. The second annual Firemen's Ball was scheduled for New Year's Eve, but was cancelled at the last minute because of inclement weather and because the hall was unfinished. It was re-scheduled for February 22, 1892, but again bad weather and possibly, a little apathy, caused a light turnout.

The year 1892 was to be a quiet year for the Hose Company, but not the Town itself. Three historical events were to take place this year; two in April and one in July.

The Vacaville Water and Light Company had been working for sometime to get the necessary equipment installed to provide electricity for the Town. On April 9, the work was completed and Superintendent T.B. Martin threw the switch that provided electricity to businesses and

residences along Main Street and other unmentioned major arteries. The project was an instant success and the company soon had 100 subscribers. The capacity of the system was to reach its limit of 300 by the end of the year.

In May and again in October of 1891 earthquakes struck in and around Vacaville. At three o'clock in the morning on April 19, 1892, just ten days after the lights went on in Vacaville, they were to go out--at least temporarily. The largest earthquake ever to hit Town shook down the poles and lines. Brick fronts of businesses tumbled onto Main Street, redwood water mains shattered, the Ulatis Creek bridge shifted three feet, and a spring suddenly appeared on Captain Chinn's ranch. A clock that had stopped running three years before, started; tables, chairs, lamps, and other furniture were knocked over; and scores of shocked citizens were tossed from their beds. Damage exceeded \$100,000 and numerous injuries were reported. Miraculously, no one was killed.

With one mighty roar, nature had destroyed all the Town's improvements and now there was no turning back on the third historical event. The incorporation bandwagon gained such momentum that in late July, it passed by a vote of 111 to 25.

Also elected were five trustees (forerunners of today's City Council), a city clerk, city treasurer and city marshal. Vacaville was no longer a village.

During the week of November 25, 1892, Vacaville lost one of its earliest pioneers and the Hose Company lost its first, and apparently only, president. Just three days after his 41st birthday, W.C. Donaho passed away. We were never able to find any mention of replacement of Mr. Donaho as president. Further, we could find no indication of any election of officers (after the first one) during the existence of Vacaville Volunteer Hose Company No. 1. Apparently this group was disbanded, or absorbed, and a new fire department authorized by the Town Trustees but that was not to come until 1895.

The Hose Company was not completely dead. On December 23, the third Annual Firemen's Ball took place at Bowles Opera House.

Mention of the Hose Company in 1893 is practically non-existent. The Board of Trustees did enact some significant fire prevention measures in April. Ordinance No. 20 with the cumbersome title of "Ordinance for Protection of Life and Property from Fire and Exposure Regulating the Erection of Buildings and Establishing Fire

Limits in the Town of Vacaville" was passed.

In the past, several attempts had been made to enact some kind of legislation to regulate building activity but they all failed. This ordinance required that before any building could be erected, it had to be approved by the Town Trustees. The ordinance contained only eight sections but it effectively set some standards and was the basis for the myriad of codes and ordinances available to us today.

The new Board of Trustees also ordered plans and specifications for a new City Hall in 1893. It was not built until 1907.

During the week of December 9, 1893, word was received that Lansing B. Mizner, partner of William McDaniel in laying out the town, died in Napa County at the age of 68. William McDaniel had disappeared from all official documents by late 1880 and was never heard from again.

There was no Firemen's Ball in either 1893 or 1894. Interest in the Association apparently slid to zero. In June, the Trustees discussed organizing a fire department for the Town but took no action. In December a committee, composed of Trustees Dobbins, Chandler, and Buck, was

appointed to reorganize the Fire Department.

Finally in July of 1895, City Ordinance No. 41 was introduced to provide a Fire Department under the government of the City. The ordinance contained ten sections outlining how the Department was to operate, and placed control of it in the hands of a Chief Engineer. This Chief Engineer was to be appointed by the Town Trustees and receive a salary of \$50 per year. Members of the Department were to be paid 25 cents for each drill or meeting attended and 50 cents per hour for each hour spent on a fire.

The Chief Engineer was to submit a payroll voucher to the Trustees for payment. This practice continued until the late 1970s. On July 25, 1895, the ordinance passed by a 4 to 0 vote, with one Trustee absent.

In its August 3 edition, The Reporter lashed out against not only some careless citizens in Town, but past organizations that banded together to provide fire protection. Under the headline of "History Repeats Itself," the article made the following statements:

"As regards fire in this town, once in awhile in times past, some patriotic citizens would secure a

few buckets painted red, but as is generally the case, a few were burned up or used by less patriotic citizens for the purpose of watering horses and if they were called for at a fire, no one knew either their coming or going. Once, it is said, the town went so far as to have an organization called a fire department and old citizens have seen them in the glory of red shirts at balls and street parades but never at a fire. While the town was under the regime of the red-shirted organization it is said that a disastrous fire broke out. The chief, instead of going to the fire, hurried home for his uniform, and the rest of the Company did likewise probably, as none of the Company showed up at the scene of the conflagration until the fire had burned itself out".

Now which organization are they talking about--the mystical Hook and Ladder Company that was supposedly formed in the early 1880s, or Hose Company No. 1 formed in 1890? One would think it was the Hook and Ladder Company. Earlier issues never mentioned any type of red-shirted uniform until the first or second Firemen's Ball, but they were not held until after 1890.

While this change was going on, The Reporter, in some articles, called it organizing a fire department and in others a

re-organization of the department. In their book, Limbaugh and Payne said it was re-organized with many of the same members. Later notices of elections of officers and line-ups listed for various inter-department baseball games do not include any of the members of the original Hose Company. In any event, we can safely say that the Fire Department, as we know it today, was established July 25, 1895, with the passing of City Ordinance No. 41.

Under the ordinance, members of the Department were to elect their own officers, with the exception of the Chief Engineer, and submit the results to the Board of Trustees for approval. This was done September 3, 1895, with the following elected: Foreman, Ed Donaldson; Assistant Foreman, Percy Nay; Clerk, Cecil Hardesty; Pipemen, Dan Moyer and T. Horrigan; Hydrantmen, F. Sullivan and George Lambert. We do not know the process used for his selection, but at the September 5 meeting, the Board of Trustees named W.H. Moore as the first Chief of the Department.

As it turned out Nathan Holt was the first, and possibly only, Chief of the Volunteer Hose Company, which was more of a private enterprise and not an officially authorized department of city

government. W.H. Moore was the first of a long line of Chief Engineers, or Fire Chiefs if you prefer, appointed or hired by the governing body of the City of Vacaville.

The Department had not held its first meeting and The Reporter was making suggestions as to how it should be run (even in those days people made suggestions). Not only should meetings be held every month, the editors said, but hydrants should be checked monthly. Since the water system was privately owned and in view of what happened on a previous fire, the last suggestion was more than appropriate. They also advised practices to perfect the Company in running a hose cart to the scene of a fire, connecting the hose to a hydrant, and getting everyone to work in the least amount of time without confusion.

On September 8, just three days after naming a fire chief and before the Department could have a decent drill, another conflagration struck Vacaville. Nearly the entire north side of Main Street between Dobbins and the Main Street bridge was destroyed. The cause of the fire was again undetermined but the town's night watchman reported he thought he heard an explosion, like that of a lamp, shortly before he saw the blaze from the Central

Hotel at the northwest corner of Main Street and Bernard Street.

In spite of the strong southwest winds, the fire backed against the wind to burn A.J. Dobbins' law office and a store, and heavily damaged a bakery. The Department had its hands full trying to keep the fire from jumping to the south side of Main Street after Bowles Opera House became heavily involved.

After the Opera House ignited, Chief Moore made the decision to raze Rambo's Store on the north side of the street to save the two remaining stores. This was probably done by dynamiting, which was not an unusual tactic in those days. A great deal of attention was also given to the Chinese settlement but because of the water main size and headway the fire had made, their primary efforts were limited to protecting exposures.

The fight lasted more than two hours. When it was over, 12 businesses, the Opera House, and some 50 Chinese houses, barns and out-buildings were destroyed. The monetary loss amounted to well over \$30,000 with only \$16,000 covered by insurance. This fire would be the last one (at least to the time of this writing), to destroy entire blocks of the business district. Indeed, the

potential was there less than three months later, but the newly-organized Fire Department was to prove its worth by holding a heavily involved Chicago Store fire to the store itself.

Rebuilding the area started almost immediately. With it came a building code amendment, and a notice that it would be strictly enforced. This ordinance was the reason business people quit using only wood in construction and went to the brick that is still standing in some cases.

In January 1896, members of the Board of Trustees were still doing what they could to upgrade the Fire Department. They reached the decision to move the fire station from Elizabeth Street to a lot owned by the Town on East Main Street. They also purchased 400 feet of new hose and another hose cart. This work was completed by February 29 by John Fadley.

By May the Town had been divided into four districts. Each district was assigned a number and when a fire was reported, the number of taps indicated its general location. All the area east of Ulatis Creek would be two taps. Three taps would indicate everything on the north side of Main Street from the bridge to Parker and Main. Four taps were sounded for fires from the south

side of Main to Parker and Main. Five taps indicated the fire was on Buck Avenue.

The organization of the Department had been altered with the addition of the new hose cart. The Chief Engineer was W.H. Moore, appointed by the Trustees. We now had two hose companies, each assigned a hose cart. Ed Donaldson, who was later to be Chief Engineer and also elected Town Marshal, was Foreman of Hose Company No. 1, but there is no listing of the officers for Hose Company No. 2.

In January of 1897 the Trustees, at the request of the members of the Department, amended Section 3 of Ordinance No. 41 to allow the Department some input in the selection of the Chief Engineer. Basically, this amendment required the two companies hold a joint meeting on the second Friday of each January. During this meeting they were to elect a Chief Engineer of their choice for approval or disapproval by the Board of Trustees. If the nominee was not approved, the Department would meet until it reached mutual agreement with the Trustees. Nothing in the amendment was to be construed as preventing the Trustees from appointing a Chief Engineer anytime it was determined to be in the best interest of the Town.

W.H. Moore was re-elected Chief Engineer with Ed Donaldson re-elected Foreman of Hose Company No. 1 and Rob Platt elected Foreman of Hose Company No. 2. This method of selecting officers continued with little or no changes until 1956 for the Fire Chief and even later with other officers.

In August the fire bell cracked during an alarm. Since it was deemed too small to do the job, arrangements were made to buy a new one. This beauty weighed nearly 1000 pounds and was nearly twice the size of the old one. The Board of Trustees instructed Chief Moore to have the necessary work done on the engine house tower to fit the new bell. Cost of the project was not to exceed \$55.

On Christmas Day 1897, the Department played a baseball game. The loser of the game was to pay for an oyster dinner at Church's Restaurant. The starting line-up for Company No. 1 was: McFarland, Sponsler, Corn, Wilson, F. Nay, Donaldson, P. Nay, Dresser and Cantelow. Hose Company No. 2's line-up was Stitt, Reichers, Reed, Schillings, Blake, Hill, Crystal, Berry and Wendell. Chief Moore and H.G. Boyce acted as umpires.

Fortunately, the players were

better firemen than baseball players. The final score was 30 to 24 in favor of Hose Company No. 1. The game also produced a broken nose to an unnamed participant and a black eye to a man by the name of Lamars. Whether he was a participant or spectator is unknown. With this memorable event, 1897 came to a close.

A joint meeting of the two hose companies in 1898 was held to elect officers for the coming year. The ballot resulted in favor of E.E. McFarland as the second Fire Chief. The Trustees confirmed the election at their next meeting. McFarland was later elected justice of the peace and served in that capacity for sometime.

The year 1898 was a quiet year for the Department. The Reporter stated many buildings were improved. One was construction of the "Triangle Building" owned by Mrs. F. Hutton. Value of the building was estimated to be \$12,000. Wonder what it would sell for today?

The Department also held another Ball on the Fourth of July. Proceeds were to be used to defray the cost of a planned fire alarm system that would connect to the residences of the firemen. A tug-of-war between firemen of Dixon, Winters, and Vacaville was planned with the winner to

receive \$15. This was a hefty sum of money when you consider the teams were to be ten men each, giving them \$1.50 a piece. This was 25 cents more than the prevailing wage per day for ten hours work.

The July 9 edition of The Reporter related that the tug-of-war between the two Vacaville hose companies was won by Hose Company No. 1. The story did not mention whether any of the other departments showed up. It is said that the attendance at the ball was the largest ever for a dance. The festivities went on until four in the morning.

The Department planned another ball game and dance for January 1899, but inclement weather cancelled the game and only 35 couples showed up for the dance. For this, the citizens received a dressing down for their lack of support from The Reporter. The editor wrote that local interest and patriotism demand that activities like this be generously supported even to the point of buying tickets whether citizens planned to attend or not.

Ed Donaldson was elected Chief of the Department for the year. Later on he was elected town marshal and held the post for a few years, before resigning amid some controversy.

Except for a few minor fires in 1899, little of note took place in the way of disaster. However, throughout the year the Department and Board of Trustees worked diligently to secure the alarm system. The system was estimated to cost approximately \$300. The Department requested the Board fund the project with the Department contributing all it had in its treasury. In addition, the Department would give to the Trustees any money coming to them through taxes and insurance companies until the Board had been re-paid.

In of January 1900, Cecil Hardesty was elected the City's fourth Fire Chief. This year was to bring one big fire, the completion of the alarm system, and a big disappointment.

First, the alarm system. In order to install such a system the City first had to arrange with the telephone company to have the switchboard manned 24 hours a day. This was done, and the president of the Board was authorized to sign a contract by which the Town would get six telephones to be located under the supervision of the Fire Department.

The Board then authorized a contract with an electric and telephonic expert, W.H. Johnston

of Benicia, who would install the system. He was to furnish wiring and other materials and connect the system to the Vacaville Light and Water Company's whistle at a cost of \$150.

Originally, the Fire Department was to pay for the system, but in May the Trustees voted to bear the cost. The Department would pay for the installation of the alarms in each firemen's house. The entire project was completed by September 1900.

In June a large fire occurred in Chinatown. It started approximately where the apparatus room of Station One is now located, and burned to the creek consuming 11 houses and doing approximately \$10,000 damage. Diligent efforts kept the fire from extending to the south side of Kendal Street. This fire, as well as a previous fire in the Chinese settlement, was ignored by The Reporter as a major event. In later editions, the editors continually stated that no fire extended past the building of origin since the formation of the Fire Department.

A great many references were made in The Reporter about the Oriental segment of the community, indicating the town would be "well-rid" of them. Their houses of prostitution, use of

narcotics, and gambling were considered a blight on the town. However, it seemed that anytime an attack was made on these people by outsiders, whether government or private, it was met with indignation by the consensus of the Town. There seemed to be a general paternal concern that said we will complain about them, ignore them, and on occasion, abuse them, but no outsiders better try it.

The big disappointment arrived in August. The Board of Fire Underwriters of the Pacific released its insurance rates. Not only had they not been lowered for Vacaville, they had actually increased! In less than five years the City had completely reorganized the Fire Department. Now it had 2 hose carts, 2 hose companies, 1500 feet of hose, 30 fire hydrants, 24 firemen, introduced and enforced fire prevention ordinances, and installed a fire alarm system. And, the cost of insurance for a building in the City was higher than for one outside the City limits. Naturally the citizens were shocked and outraged.

The Board of Trustees immediately notified the Underwriters that if adjustments were not made in short order they could be sure the members of their association would sell no

insurance in Vacaville. The rates were eventually lowered but it took time.

CHAPTER THREE

1901 - 1910

January 1901. The census of 1900 showed the population of Vacaville to be 1224 and the Township 4,160. The percentage of growth for the City and the Township was the largest in the county. C.L. Dresser was elected the fifth Fire Chief of the Department.

The period of 1901 to 1910 was to bring about the demise of several Vacaville pioneers and leading citizens including Ed Donaldson, Vacaville's third Fire Chief. He was elected town marshal in April of 1900, but by February of 1901 was in hot water with the Board of Trustees. He was charged with negligence in his failure to collect poll taxes, attend trustee meetings as required, and to enforce ordinances.

His only defense was that the job did not pay a livable wage and he was forced to take outside employment, making it impossible to devote his full attention to the job. He stated that he could have engaged in dishonest practices in Chinatown but that was not his style. In May 1901 his resignation was accepted by the Trustees. His health could have been partially responsible, for he passed away at age 38 in June 1902.

In July 1901 the Fire Department and the Board of Trustees were

taken to task by The Reporter for some deficiencies in the fire alarm system. Apparently the fire bell was inoperative as was the fire whistle that was installed on the steam engine of the Vacaville Light and Water Company. The Board had earlier declared that no payments were to be made with City funds without its consent. This must have meant that the Fire Department could not make repairs without prior authorization of the Board. If that was so, then The Reporter implored the Trustees to accept the responsibility and get repairs made or give the Fire Department the responsibility along with monetary means, to make repairs as needed. There was no public response by the Trustees or the Fire Department.

The Board was having troubles of its own. One trustee, Mr. Crosswaite, was removed from office by the Board because he had been absent from the City for a period longer than 90 days without authorization. It was first rumored that he left by sailing ship for England. This rumor proved false, though, when a Solano County resident who happened to be traveling in the vicinity of Berkeley witnessed Mr. Crosswaite's forcible removal from a train. He had neglected to purchase a ticket and did not have the wherewithal to do so when

discovered by the conductor. Mr. Crosswaite was replaced by James Koford. Mr. Koford attended one meeting and he, too, disappeared for a short time. He evidently had moved to Berkeley without telling anyone. His resignation was finally received in September. At that time Professor Ryhiner was appointed to fill the remainder of the term.

January 1903. Percy Nay became the sixth Fire Chief. Nothing of consequence happened during the first five months. At the Trustees' meeting on the 7th of June, it was reported that alarm boxes six, seven, and eight were inoperative and had been so since May 20. The city clerk was instructed to notify the telephone company of this fact, and that no outstanding bills would be paid until repairs were made.

In its June 27 issue the Vacaville Reporter blasted the Department with both barrels. The Board of Trustees did not escape its wrath either. Due to the length of the article we offer here only the nearly verbatim account as it pertains to the Fire Department:

"There was a fire alarm set off on Sunday afternoon, probably started by some kids. The fire was put out by a few pails of water. No material damage was done. Criticism comes in that the time

required to turn in the alarm seems to be too great. When the central station of the Vacaville fire alarm was called up there was no possibility of an alarm being sounded nor were the alarms in the firemen's houses sounded. Theoretically we have a fire alarm system when in fact we don't - a whistle can be sounded only when the steam is on. But, as to the alarms in the firemen's houses, we cannot understand why they are not kept in condition. The Town pays the Chief of the Fire Department a salary to look after such matters. He does not seem to be doing it. In the case of the alarm Sunday morning, nothing serious resulted because of the inefficiency of the fire alarm service, but things could have been different. We are paying the Fire Department in the Town and are entitled to good results. We are paying a Chief's salary, not large to be sure, but more apparently than he is earning unless everything is in order, \$60 per year. We expect from that officer a constant supervision of all the apparatus and appliances of the Department. If there is a defect in the alarm system we do not expect him to be urged to perfect it. That is his business without urging. It is what he gets his \$5 monthly for. We wish to see him earn it.

We have had competent chiefs of

the Fire Department; we have had very few of them. While the selection of the chiefs has been made by the Fire Department, that choice has to be ratified by the Board of Trustees. In other words they elect. The Vacaville Fire Department has been passing the honor around every year and frequently no consideration has been given to fitness. Occasionally they get a good man.

We are not kicking about Chief Nay particularly, but that practice has to be stopped. When the Department is in good hands, it should be kept there. The Chieftainship is not a plaything to be passed from competent to incompetent hands. We hope the future will see the Trustees living up to their responsibilities and permit no change which does not improve the Department and keep up the high standard of efficiency."

Like the article of a year previous, this one too seemed to be ignored. There was no mention of it in ensuing minutes of Trustee meetings, nor was there any public response made by the Fire Department. As a matter of fact, a third article appeared in the May 2, 1903, edition, and it too was totally ignored. The practice of electing a new Chief each year continued until the 1920s.

Except for the previously mentioned article, John Wren, the seventh Chief of the Department, had an unremarkable term.

However, in December the Board of Trustees asked the telephone company to reduce its rates for each telephone on the fire alarm system from \$1.50 to \$1.00 per month beginning August 1, 1904. The telephone company granted the reduction but said November 1 would be when the new rates go into effect. The Board did not accept this proposition and ordered the telephones removed by January 1, 1904.

Chief Wren and the Board of Trustees had already begun communications with the San Francisco agents of the Gamewell Fire Alarm Company concerning cost of installing boxes in Vacaville.

The January 1904 joint meeting of the two fire companies saw the election of John Deputy as the eighth Chief of the Department, and the consolidation of the two companies into one.

The previous two-company system had allowed 20 members per company; with each company having its own bylaws. The joint company adopted Hose Company No. One's constitution and bylaws, but changed Section 1 of Article 4

to admit 24 members total instead of the 20 men per company permitted under the old system. No explanation was offered why the Department cut its available manpower from a possible 40 men down to 24. The only other event of note took place in June. Members of the Department, concerned about the possibility of injury on duty, asked the Trustees for a small raise in pay. This raise would be set aside in some manner and provide at least a small amount of compensation in case a member's injury kept him from his job.

The Trustees thought the compensation plan was a good idea, but that it should be done in another manner. As was usually done, and still is on occasion, the matter was laid on the table for future consideration. No action was taken.

The year 1905 brought no controversy or large fires. Elected that year as the ninth Fire Chief was M. Cline. The only item about the Department was the announcement that the firemen would be playing a baseball game to raise money for new uniform shirts and hats. So their names will not be lost in antiquity, the lineup is listed here: Coleman, Neil, J.W. Bentley, Voll, Duncan, F. Leedy, Thorington, Rolla Gray, W. Leedy, and R. Canon. They lost the

game 21-10. By the way, a bowling alley was opened in the Barcar Block in November of 1905, but went out of business in June 1906.

The year 1906 was to bring the first recorded instance of mutual aid extended to another agency. C.R. Bugbee was the tenth Fire Chief.

On July 24 a fire erupted in Suisun City that threatened to burn the entire town. At 4:15 in the afternoon the City received a phone call asking for any help it could send. One of the hose carts was readied and attached to a bus drawn by four horses and driven by Foreman Jack Duncan. Another wagon was loaded with men, mostly our volunteers, and the small caravan set out. In all, 17 men responded.

They arrived at approximately 5:30 and found that the hose cart was practically useless, there being no pressure in the water mains. Only the timely arrival of a steam engine from Vallejo saved the City from being totally destroyed. The pumper was set up at one of the docks for drafting and supplied water for the hose lines.

The Vacaville Reporter reprinted an article from the Vallejo Times under the headline "Applies to

Vacaville, Too." The Times stated "that if Suisun had been provided with a modern little firefighting plant, including a steam engine, big cisterns filled with water in the central part of town, and an abundance of hose all costing less than \$12,000, over \$150,000 worth of property would have been rescued from fire in that town. Most other towns and cities can profit by Suisun's sad and costly experience if they have the sense to do so." Sounds like there might have been a little crowing on Vallejo's part but truer words were never spoken.

At the Trustees' meeting during the first week of August the advisability of securing a fire engine for Vacaville was discussed and this led to an informal query of whether the present water pressure was adequate. After all was said and done, no action was taken as usual. It would be ten long years before Vacaville would get a pumping apparatus.

Other events were to take place in 1906. In August, plans for the new City Hall on East Main Street were accepted. Ordinance No. 129 requiring property owners to clear all brush, weeds, and grass on their property to the center of the street was passed. Shade trees on the street side of their property had to be trimmed to a height of

nine feet. All work was to be done at the expense of the property owners. In November, the Trustees announced that the old firehouse on East Main Street was to be sold at a private sale and the building removed. A new station was to be incorporated in the new City Hall.

During the last week of November a fire occurred that very nearly caused us to receive our first mutual aid. A fire broke out in a lodging house across the street from Station One at about the location of the present-day house at the north end of the parking lot. With a strong north wind blowing, everything between Dobbins and Parker to Main Street and possibly more was threatened if the fire extended beyond the origin.

Three factors prevented this disaster. The fact that the building involved, as well as the one next to it, was constructed with corrugated tin on the outside with an eight-foot clearance between the buildings helped contain the fire. The skill and hard work of responding firemen in extinguishing the fire and protecting the exposures limited damage, beyond the original building involved, to some scorching of the neighboring building. The fire looked so bad initially that Mr. Dobbins, President of the Board of Trustees, ran to the telephone

office. He called the Suisun Fire Department and requested all the assistance that could be mustered.

Professor Ryhiner, a Vacaville resident, was attending a dance in Fairfield when the news came that a fire was raging in Vacaville. He stated that fully a hundred men volunteered to come along to fight the fire.

After making the call, Dobbins returned to the fire. When he saw that the Vacaville firemen were able to contain the fire he called Suisun to cancel the mutual aid. Dobbins was gratified to learn that the assistance requested had not yet left. They had, however, loaded three flat cars with fire equipment to respond to Vacaville, along with the manpower mentioned by Professor Ryhiner.

The fire pointed up a need of the Fire Department -- a hook and ladder truck. A subscription of property owners and businessmen was started almost immediately. In one week \$341 was raised, including \$127 from the Oriental community. It was estimated that the cost of the equipment would be somewhere between \$500 and \$600. If enough money could be raised, the Department also wished to purchase rubber coats, hats, and shields.

In January 1907, four inches of snow fell in Vacaville, J.W. Sullivan was elected Fire Chief, and the fund to purchase a hook and ladder truck had swollen to \$619. The firemen were having second thoughts about the purchase of a hook and ladder truck, though. It had been brought to their attention that a Stemple Chemical Engine could be purchased for \$750.

This "engine" was apparently hand-drawn, consisted of one 60-gallon chemical tank, two small hand tanks, and an 18-foot extension ladder. It was pointed out that such a unit would be particularly useful here since some areas could be reached only by one hose line from a hydrant and other areas could not be reached at all.

By May of 1907, the Department had definitely decided it wanted the chemical engine. Chief Sullivan went before the Town Trustees with this decision and asked them to donate the \$150 needed for the purchase. Even though the Town's treasury was very low, the Trustees indicated the money would be available when needed. For some reason the Board of Trustees had to sign the purchase contract, and after some haggling over wording of the contract, this was done. This also caused some conflict between the

Trustees and the Department. The Trustees contended that the agreement was that the money raised by the Department would be turned over to them so that the engine could be paid for when the contract was signed. The manufacturer was also refusing to ship the engine unless the contract was signed by the president of the Board. The Fire Department's position was that the money was set aside in its treasury by resolution and would stay there until it was demonstrated that the apparatus was all it was claimed to be.

There was further discussion on the matter but it was allowed to rest on the assurance that the Fire Department would have a special meeting on the matter. The matter was settled at the next Trustees' meeting. The Department turned the money over to the Trustees with the understanding it would be held by them pending the arrival of the engine.

The engine arrived the last week of October. The Department was authorized to spend \$25 to erect some type of structure as a test fire and the date of the test was set. From here things really began to go downhill.

Apparently the man who was to assemble and demonstrate the

equipment did not show up until the day of the test. This gave him little time to prepare. The Department had everything in readiness for the test and lit the fire. Somewhere along the line, communications were not what they should have been. The Department had to extinguish the fire with a back-up hose line it had laid. The equipment was not even activated because "the fire was too far along" for the engine to be effective and "too much was expected of the engine." The engine was shipped out of town the next week, the agent having found another buyer.

It was back to the drawing board for the firemen. It didn't take long to come up with a new plan or the backing of the Vacaville Reporter and a few businessmen. The new plan was to buy a steam engine or another apparatus with pumping capabilities. The Reporter published a long article in its November 23, 1907, edition outlining the new plan and asking for support. The editor stated that the City of Suisun had recently purchased such an engine at a cost of \$2,250. They explained that the purchase of the engine would probably result in substantial savings in insurance rates and in all probability save that much in losses at the first fire.

A local merchant was already

willing to subscribe \$25 toward the purchase if other businessmen would donate in proportion to their business. They expected to raise \$1,000 in this way, and that. This amount, added to the \$750 already in the fund along with a donation of \$500 by the Board of Trustees, would pay for the engine. Enthusiasm for projects in Vacaville have a way of waning rapidly and this project was no different.

Although The Reporter occasionally brought up the subject, very little was done. In February a Department representative went before the Board of Trustees asking for an opinion about the probability of that body providing backing and funding. If they were not going to give assistance, the Department wanted its original money returned so a hook and ladder wagon could be bought. The Board was very non-committal, and stated that the treasury was in a bad way. They thought it was a good plan, but felt someone among themselves should examine Suisun's engine to see if it met Vacaville's requirements. Whether this was done was not officially documented. We do know that on May 29, 1908, the Fire Department asked for its money, which the Board returned.

In July the Department let a

contract to the Brown and Foutz Company to build a hook and ladder truck for \$275. This contract was for the building of the truck only. The hooks and ladders were to be provided by C.R. Bugbee. Brown and Foutz gave up the contract in August, which was taken over by Frank Costello. All of these companies were local people. In fact, Foutz and Bugbee were members of the Department and Bugbee had served as Chief. By September, the completed unit was delivered to the Department. As the bill for the construction was now due and payable, Chief Platt went to the Board of Trustees for the \$150 they had promised. The Board, with some reluctance, gave up the \$150. Can you imagine the frustration the firemen must have been feeling? As early as 1906 efforts were made to get a steam engine, but they proved fruitless. It took nearly two years to get the hook and ladder truck. It would be more than 70 years before the Town would buy another ladder truck. They would not get pumping apparatus until 1916.

In late summer of 1908 the Department purchased eight three-gallon soda and acid extinguishers. They were placed in special boxes at locations around town to use in case of fire. They proved so effective the Department sent a representative

to the Trustees to ask for an appropriation to purchase additional extinguishers. A motion was made to provide \$150. The motion died for lack of a second.

Members of the Department did not give up their efforts to provide equipment for themselves. Occasionally, they would sponsor dances or Vaudeville type shows, using hometown talent on a volunteer basis to raise funds.

They also had long memories. In February 1909, Chief S.W. Bentley went before the Board. He stated the Department had \$104.90 in its treasury and wanted to buy more extinguishers to place around Town. The Trustees were asked to match the Department dollar-for-dollar as they had once agreed to do. A motion was made and passed that a warrant for \$105 be drawn payable to the Department.

At close to noon on Sunday, July 11, 1909, a fire was discovered in the Hotel Raleigh situated on the northeast corner of Parker and Main. The fire in a two-story wood structure was not discovered until it had involved the attic area. In spite of efforts of the firemen, the building burned to the ground. Luckily there was only a slight north wind blowing. Once the building became heavily involved, the major efforts were

to protect exposures. Several spot fires occurred down wind. Citizens and firemen were able to extinguish them before they gained much headway.

The major exposure problem was the Presbyterian Church, located across Parker Street from the Hotel. This wood building was adorned with a steeple that was too high for the firemen to reach. When the radiated heat caused it to ignite, firemen cut the steeple off to save the church. Later, in appreciation, the ladies of the church treated the firemen to a banquet. The newspaper heaped much praise on the firemen for their efforts, as did most of the citizens. However, not everyone in town was happy with the firemen. This was indicated in the Board of Trustees' meeting of September 10, 1909. The Board passed a resolution praising the Department for its work. The resolution on part states: "Be it further resolved, we denounce and decry, the scurrilous report circulated by defamers of honest intentions, casting despersions on the good name and record of the Vacaville Fire Department which but for their timely efforts a large portion of our town would today be in ashes." Nothing in the paper before or after the resolution indicated what, if any, dissatisfaction existed.

The rumors and insinuations apparently continued for several months, but the matter was laid to rest in December 1909. At their regular monthly meeting Chief S.W. Bentley made a motion, seconded by C.R. Bugbee, a former Chief, "that charges be preferred against all members of the Department who were intoxicated at the Hotel Raliegh fire." The motion was carried and so ordered. The subject is not mentioned again either in The Reporter, the minutes of the Trustees' meetings, or the minutes of the Fire Department's meetings.

As a side note, we might mention that at the time of the fire, the Hotel was being operated by J.M. Brazelton, Secretary of the Fire Department; and J.C. Duncan, who was Foreman of the Department that year. The house of Gus Mauer on Cernon Street received minor damage from flying brands from the Hotel. J.C. Duncan, C.R. Bugbee, and M. Cline were overcome by heat and smoke, and had to be removed from the fire line for a time. Duncan was to be elected Chief of the Department in January 1910. Oddly enough, the only incident of note that took place in 1910 was the purchase of 500 feet of 2-1/2 inch hose.

CHAPTER FOUR

1911 - 1920

The census of Solano County in 1910 showed the population of Vacaville dropped from 1220 people in 1900 to 1177. However, Vacaville's loss was smaller than both Benicia and Fairfield. In those days Rio Vista and Winters had larger populations than Fairfield, and Dixon had only seven persons less than Fairfield. This decade was to be a real downer for the firemen for the first five years. As early as 1906 it was realized that Vacaville needed more than the two hose carts and the hook and ladder wagon to provide adequate fire protection for the City of Vacaville.

The Department sent committees to the Town Trustees at least twice, and as many as four times, a year to plead for proper equipment and some type of pumping apparatus. Often times, representatives from companies such as American LaFrance and Gorham Fire Equipment Company would accompany the committees. Always the reply was the same: "Lack of funds." Their stock method of handling the matter was to leave it up to the Department to ascertain how much could be raised by subscription and possibly the Town could kick in enough to meet the balance.

Raising money by subscription was not always easy. In 1913, the

Department found itself in need of a better method of sounding fire alarms than the bell it used. It decided a fire whistle was the answer. To raise the funds, they obtained movie films and contracted with the Metropolitan Concert Company to present a show.

The Vacaville Reporter provided a great deal of publicity and urged the citizens to buy tickets whether or not they could attend. Both The Reporter and the Department were greatly disappointed. The benefit netted the Department a grand total of \$10.50. Either times were really tough or the Town was not yet ready for light opera.

Members of the Department were so disgusted that at their next meeting a motion was made and passed to purchase a "tin whistle." It was to be placed in a conspicuous place with a notice thanking the citizens of Vacaville for their great support. Fortunately, cooler heads prevailed and the money was put to better use. A committee of Frank Eversole, M. Cline and Bert Evans was named to arrange a banquet for the firemen. At least in this way, the restaurant that provided the feed made a profit.

Other things of interest took place this time period. In April

1913, a Mr. Deakin was arrested for driving over some fire hose. At his trial Mr. Deakin admitted to the charge. His lawyer pointed out to the judge that no ordinance covered this situation, and the charge was dismissed. The Town persisted in its effort to recover damages and in August Mr. Uhl, president of the Board of Trustees, announced that a check for \$12.50 had been received from Mr. Deakin as settlement in the case.

Prior to this, the Board amended Ordinance 93 making it a misdemeanor to drive any vehicle over fire hose. Upon conviction, the violator could be fined no less than \$10 or more than \$45, jailed for no more than 45 days, or both.

A year previous to this, Mary L. Saxton was elected to the post of City Treasurer by a vote of 125 to 101. Miss Saxton was the first woman elected to City office and served in that capacity for many years.

Joseph Libonati was voted into the Department in May 1913, and remained a member until 1958. He served the Department for 45 continuous years. During his tenure, Libonati would serve two separate terms as Fire Chief, from 1919 to 1920 and from 1942 to 1943.

Finally, in early 1915 a method was found to provide the money needed to improve fire protection. In 1912 T.H. Buckingham suggested in a letter to The Reporter that the Town purchase some elevated ground on the Uhl property, drill a well, construct two 50,000 gallon reinforced concrete tanks, and hook the system into the water mains. The idea did not receive much consideration and at the time, neither did his suggested method of financing -- a bond issue.

Bond issues were not new in Vacaville, nor were they certain to pass. In 1901 a bond issue was put on the ballot to provide a sewer system for the Town. It failed mainly due to a light turnout of voters. Another attempt was made in 1904, but the Trustees made the mistake of tying in a measure to buy the Water and Light Company. The sewer portion failed to get the required two-thirds majority by just two votes. The tally was 134 for the issue and 91 against. The bond for taking over the Water and Light Company failed miserably. Finally, in 1906 the sewer issue alone was again placed on the ballot, and passed by a ratio of 4 to 1.

As part of the general election of November 1914, the Board of Trustees put Propositions 1 and 2

on the ballot. Both propositions passed. Due to some unknown irregularities, however, the results were found to be null and void and had to be re-submitted to the voters in June 1915.

In late February 1915, someone came up with the idea that maybe the Town would vote the passage of a third issue to finance the improved fire protection. In order to come up with a realistic cost, and an agreement on exactly what was needed to provide the maximum amount of improvement, a committee composed of Trustees Johnson and Sharpe and Firemen Schroeder and Radcliffe was appointed to research various motor-driven pumper apparatus.

In addition, the City Engineer was instructed to prepare estimates for the erection of a 50,000 gallon water tank to be built on a hill near the reservoir. He was to include estimates for a chemical wagon and more hose.

In March the Chief of the Department, R.C. Gray, arranged to have a representative from Gorham Fire Apparatus Company to demonstrate one of its pumpers. All members of the Board of Trustees attended the demonstration and were highly impressed.

At the Trustees' meeting the last

of March, the committee and the City Engineer submitted their estimates. The water tank, hose, and chemical wagon would cost approximately \$5,500. The committee figured \$5,000 would cover the cost of the pumper demonstrated by Gorham. Since the unit was already equipped with a 40-gallon chemical tank, 250 feet of chemical hose and a hose bed with the capacity of carrying 1000 feet of hose, the Trustees voted to place this method on the ballot as Proposition 3. An additional \$1,000 was thrown in to buy more hose, some other needed equipment, and a siren. The proposition in this form passed by a vote of 227 to 61 in June 1915.

One would think specifications would be drawn up, bids requested, and the engine ordered now that the people had expressed their will and money was available. However, the Trustees were very cautious and several letters went back and forth to the Board of Underwriters. Their main concern was to get a vehicle that would give the largest return in reduced insurance rates. Specifications for the new engine were finally submitted to the Board by the city attorney and the city clerk was instructed to advertise for bids. Four bids were received in October but only two included everything requested.

Representatives from the various companies were given an opportunity to explain the merits of what they had to offer. The Trustees then voted to postpone any action in order to have time for investigation and proper consideration.

Action was postponed for so long that even the people of the Town were beginning to question the delay. The answer given in The Reporter was that the Board was awaiting the arrival of an engineer from the Board of Underwriters. They thought that before deciding on an engine it would be better to have expert advice. The Underwriters had promised to send a man within two weeks to look over local conditions. Mr. R.B. Matthews finally arrived and after inspecting the Town, made several recommendations. The most important one was that the engine be equipped with at least a 750 GPM pump as the Town's water system could provide that and more in the mercantile district. At their meeting on November 16, the Trustees, based on Matthew's recommendations, rejected all the bids previously received. They then drew up a set of ten questions they wanted the Board of Underwriters to answer before they called for new bids. Their reply was received the first week of December with six of the ten

questions answered. The three most important ones were (1) a pump capacity of 250-300 GPM would not warrant much of a reduction in insurance rates, (2) a man would have to be hired full-time to care for the engine, volunteer help would not do, and (3) the siren connected to telephones to sound the fire alarm was inadequate and alarm boxes should be installed. The Board felt it was impossible to comply with Items 2 and 3. It authorized the city attorney to go ahead with the original plans, but to increase the size of the pump to 500 GPM.

By this time, the patience of the firemen had been exhausted. At their December 10, 1915, meeting they voted to present their own specifications for an engine to the Trustees and request that the apparatus be purchased. They further voted unanimously that "if the Board did not wish to abide by the wishes of the Department, that every member thereof tender their resignation and resign therefrom." The December 17 edition of The Reporter announced that the Board of Trustees had instructed the city attorney to call for bids according to specifications submitted by the Fire Department. There was no mention of the threat to resign. By January 7, 1916, many bids had been received. On January 14, The Reporter announced that the

contract had been awarded to the Seagraves Company. They were to furnish a motor propelled four cylinder, 53 horsepower, triple combination chemical and hose wagon equipped with a turbine centrifugal pump together with 500 feet of first quality cotton fire hose and a fire siren, all for \$6,000. When bids were first called for, Seagraves' bid for the machine alone was \$6,000. The contract stipulated delivery would be made within 90 working days. Vacaville finally got its first motorized pumper on July 4, 1916.

In the meantime, a very confusing situation arose. In March the Department submitted the names of four members to be in charge of the new engine when it arrived. The Board ratified the choices. In June the Board received two petitions, one signed by 24 of the firemen and the other signed by 33 local businessmen. The wording of the petitions was not given, but apparently the Board interpreted them as being a request that the offices of Fire Chief and First Engineer be combined and that S.W. Bentley be named to the post. Thinking this was what the firemen wanted, the Board declared the office of Fire Chief, held at that time by J.M. Brazelton, to be vacant and named S.W. Bentley the Fire Chief and First Engineer. They also thought

the firemen wanted their membership to be no more than 21 men and an ordinance was passed making it so.

On June 20, the firemen came to the Board stating that the Board had misunderstood entirely their intentions. They had not intended that Chief Brazelton be replaced, they had not intended that the two positions be combined and they had not intended that membership be limited to 21 men. What they wanted was for the Board to name S.W. Bentley as First Engineer in charge of the new engine, Chief Brazelton to retain his position, and membership of the Department to be set at a minimum of 31 men not 21.

Armed with this information the Board restored Brazelton's position and consigned the previous ordinance to the waste basket. With everything restored to its former status, the Trustees voted to adjourn for two weeks, apparently feeling a long rest was needed to recover from the confusion. At a later meeting of the Department, the members elected Henry Schielke as First Engineer.

By July the engine had been received and the new fire siren installed. At 12:45 a.m. on July 23, Chief Brazelton turned in a test fire alarm. The idea was to

determine how efficient the new siren would be in rousing the boys out of bed. Most of the firemen were awakened, but so were a lot of other people who hurried out expecting to see the new engine at its first fire. They were not only disappointed, but probably a little upset. The test did show that the siren didn't wake some of the firemen. They attributed this to intervening buildings that checked and diverted the sound waves. The siren was later placed at a higher elevation to overcome this deficiency.

The remaining years of this decade passed rather quietly compared to 1915 and 1916. Several incidents did occur during the years of World War I that may be of interest to the reader. On February 16, 1917, an article in the Vacaville Reporter, headlined "Resignations Are Requested, Trustees Object to Joyriding on Fire Engine," detailed events of the previous Sunday. Apparently two members of the Department, Henry Schielke and V.A. Radcliffe, decided to get in a little extra drivers' training after consuming an undetermined amount of their favorite beverage.

Their journey came to an abrupt end when they swung too wide in making the turn off Callen Street (now East Monte Vista) onto McClellan Street and their pumper

stuck in the mud. The machine was so mired down that it was several hours before extrication could be made and the pumper safely returned to the firehouse. A story in that same edition announced a special meeting of the Fire Department had been called for that evening. The following excerpt is from the minutes of that meeting as it pertains to the incident: "The meeting was called for the purpose of taking up the matter of the resignations asked for by the Town Trustees of members Henry Schielke and V.A. Radcliffe for their improper conduct of the Fire Engine on Sunday of the 11th instant, and also for an explanation of member George G. Dalto who happened to be on the engine at the same time. After member George G. Dalto explaining how he happened to be on the engine, and telling of the condition and conduct of Schielke and Radcliffe, he was by ballot unanimously exonerated, and upon motion duly made, seconded and carried the resignations of Schielke and Radcliffe were accepted."

Radcliffe was an eight-year veteran of the Department and had served as Fire Chief from January 1914 to January 1915. Schielke had been a member since 1910. This event did not put an end to his career as a firefighter. Apparently Schielke maintained

close contact with the Department, even assisting on fires unofficially from time-to-time.

The Fire Department minutes of July 8, 1921, contains the following paragraph: "On account of Henry Schielke doing such excellent work at the recent Merchant fire, it was recommended by several of the members present that he be asked to reinstate in the Department." Schielke was present at the next meeting and served the Department faithfully and well until 1943. His total of 29 years served places him sixth in longevity with the Department.

The City of Vacaville took one course of action to buy a motor-driven pumper and the Town of St. Helena took another. After coming here to look at our pumper in late 1916, their town fathers eventually purchased one in early March for \$5,400. Unfortunately, they only had \$5,730 in the city treasury. In order to pay for it they discharged five city officials and turned off the city lighting system until the new engine was paid for.

While on a drill fireman H.D. Eddy miscalculated the engine's speed when dismounting from it. His injuries kept him off work for several days and he submitted a

claim for \$119 to the Trustees. He was eventually given \$23.33 as compensation. On September 5, 1919, the City came under the State Compensation Insurance Fund. Total cost would be \$126.13 per year and include all City employees and firemen.

Nathan Holt, Sr., died in San Francisco of a heart disease at age 59 in October 1917. Nathan was elected the first Foreman of Volunteer Hose Company No. 1 formed in 1890. Ironically, the widow of the first president of the Company, W.C. Donahoe, lost her life at age 65 in a fire that occurred in February 1920, at the Brookshire Apartments in San Francisco.

On November 1, 1919, the Department responded to two fires the same night -- one after the other -- for the first time in its history. The first alarm at 11:30 p.m. was for a fire that destroyed a small, unoccupied house on C.J. Uhl's place. The second alarm called them out again to a chimney fire at E.W. Manuel's home on Main Street. This alarm came in just as the firemen were putting away the equipment used during the first fire.

During World War I, the Department did its part in assisting the War Effort. A total of nine men either enlisted or

were drafted into the various armed forces.

Our second recorded instance of mutual aid took place on October 17, 1920. The Capitol Hotel and another structure in Dixon were destroyed by fire. The pumper and crew made the response in 14 minutes flat. Apparently Dixon had no pumping apparatus as The Reporter stated it had only hydrant pressure. After the arrival of our pumper, firemen were able to control the fire. The buildings were owned by W.T. Dawson and losses were estimated at \$30,000.

CHAPTER FIVE

1921 - 1930

The "Roaring Twenties" would treat the Fire Department in a kinder manner than the previous decade had. Money to run the Department would be a little easier to come by, both from the Board of Trustees and from fund-raisers and subscriptions. Efforts to provide fire protection for the rural areas would be initiated which would lead to the district organization as we know it today. The command structure and selection of certain officers would change to some degree and the Department would get a new fire engine; and it would get it in a matter of months after the need was shown to exist. As a matter of fact, the whole incident was treated in a rather blase' manner compared to 1915-16.

Financially, the year 1921 started off rather bleakly when Omer Alley and Sam Downs went before the Board of Trustees to ask permission to bring a carnival to Town under sponsorship of the Department. The money would be used to improve Department equipment. When questioned by Trustee Uhl, Alley stated that the firemen's percentage would amount to about \$125. Uhl said he would rather vote that amount out of the Town treasury than have a carnival in Town. Alley then countered that the firemen wanted the carnival even more than the money. Trustee Rolla

Gray (who was a volunteer before being elected to the Board of Trustees) made a motion to allow the carnival, but it died for lack of a second. The matter was laid over to the next meeting and denied at that time.

In defense of the Board of Trustees we must remember that carnivals caused policing problems and other increased costs. While the firemen would realize a \$100 or so profit, many hundreds of dollars would have left Town with the carnival. Despite Uhl's statement, no record of that amount being voted out of the Town treasury to the Fire Department exists.

Undaunted, the firemen laid plans to promote a boxing contest. They had used this means to raise funds with fair success at least once in the past, but this time it bombed. The Department lost \$195.76. Since their treasury had only \$60 in it at the time, the 29 members were assessed \$4.70 each to make up the loss. The City continued to pay firemen for their services. However, the volunteers' treasury reached a low point at their March 10, 1922, meeting when they voted not to pay their bills simply because they were flat broke.

In spite of their monetary problems and setbacks, the firemen decided to raise money to

replace the existing fire-alarm system. The description of the system was very vague but indicated that numbered alarm boxes would be placed at the corner of every other block. There would be a numbered board in the engine house that would indicate the number of the box activated. It would also activate the siren at the same time. They originally estimated the cost at \$700 to \$800. To raise the funds, they planned a series of dances and other events.

In the past they planned dances on weekends, either Friday or Saturday nights. For some reason, they planned the first one of this campaign for Wednesday, November 29, and it paid off in grand style. The Vacaville Reporter described it as being the most successful, both socially and financially, ever held in Vacaville. Approximately 75 couples attended and from \$350 to \$400 profit was realized.

Flushed by success, they immediately arranged for a second dance in late February 1923, but it was cancelled due to the prevalence of colds in the vicinity. The memory of the flu epidemic that caused so many deaths a few years earlier was still fresh in the memories of both the firemen and the community.

For some reason the Trustees changed their minds about allowing carnivals in Town and allowed the firemen to sponsor one in July of 1923. A whopping \$553.86 profit was made on this endeavor. This put their Alarm System Fund at \$918.06.

Apparently, lethargy set in again, for not much is mentioned about the fund until October 1924, with one exception. At their meeting of January 14, 1924, the members voted to ask the Board of Trustees to deputize each member of the Department. The members would then give tickets or arrest motorists who parked their cars in front of fire hydrants. All fines collected from violators would be placed in the Fire Alarm Fund. Whether they actually approached the Trustees with this unorthodox plan is not recorded in either the volunteers' minutes or the minutes of the Board of Trustees.

By late September or early October of 1924, the firemen had changed their minds about replacing the fire alarm system. They found out the cost would be much higher than originally estimated and the improvements over the old system would not be that much better.

Their plan now was to buy a chassis and build their own truck to fight fires not only in Town,

but also in the rural areas that had no water supplies. The firemen would donate the money they had raised and get subscriptions from citizens who lived within three miles of the City limits in any direction. The City's share of the cost was to build an addition to City Hall to accommodate the longer ladders on the new apparatus. This unit would also provide a badly needed back-up for Engine One.

In early November 1922, an alarm was received for a fire at the McKinney home on Buck Avenue. Fortunately it proved to be nothing more serious than a chimney burning out. Engine One was chain-driven and as it was leaving the firehouse the chain broke. Further delay in responding was caused by the misunderstanding of the location. The engine was towed to the McKinley home on Merchant Street instead of the McKinney home on Buck Avenue.

Prior to World War I, little or no effort seems to have been made to provide firefighting equipment for those areas outside the villages and towns of Solano County. If a fire of any type occurred, property owners and neighbors would respond with their hired hands to assist as best they could. On occasion, City firemen and other volunteers would respond from

Town. Grass fires were fought with hand tools, backfires, and wet barley sacks. When structures were involved, bucket brigades were usually set up -- mostly to protect other structures while others removed what furniture they could from a burning home.

Two large fires, one in 1921 and the other in 1923, appeared to be the major factors in recognizing the need to provide men and equipment in some organized fashion to provide fire protection. The first, which happened over the Fourth of July weekend, burned from Batavia near Dixon to the Round Hill School House near Rio Vista, a length of 25 miles. The width of the fire varied from one to three miles. There were also several fires in the City of Vacaville that weekend but no structures were involved.

The 1923 fire started on September 16 at the foot of Mix Canyon and burned past Rockville to the Napa "Y" (apparently near the present-day Red Top Dairy) on the west, and the Fairfield cemetery on the east. The fire burned some 21,000 acres, spreading approximately 30 miles long and 15 miles wide. Damage amounted to about \$60,000 but burned only one building --an old school house on the Napa County side. More buildings would have been lost but for the efforts of

135 Marines brought in from Mare Island.

By the middle of the year the new engine was in service. This was due mostly to the efforts of Elmer King, who was not only the First Engineer, but reportedly a first-rate mechanic. The description listed in the Vacaville Reporter shows it to be a 1925 Chevrolet. On it was mounted two 40-gallon chemical tanks, two 150-foot lengths of chemical hose, ten small Babcock extinguishers, and 500 feet of 1-1/2" hose. This engine remained the property of the volunteers until late 1927 when they transferred ownership to the City of Vacaville for several reasons.

From the firemen's side of it, they had bought the unit from funds raised by carnivals and subscriptions. However, no provisions were made for its upkeep or supply replacement. From the Trustees' side, they had been paying these bills, but objected to using Town funds for this purpose when the engine did not belong to them, and they had no control over it.

The only stipulation the Trustees made in accepting the unit was to allow the firemen to use the vehicle on calls outside the City limits. They would not, however, be liable for injuries suffered by

the firemen on these calls, nor would they pay them for time spent on rural calls.

During this decade there would be a great deal of interest in providing better fire protection to rural areas and in forming fire districts. It would be many years before any meaningful progress would be made. These endeavors will be covered in greater detail in the following chapter.

In earlier chapters describing the formation of the Department, we mentioned that the ordinance was written in a manner that left full power in the selection of the Fire Chief in the hands of the City Board of Trustees. They abrogated some of this power in 1896 or 1897. They honored the members' request to allow them to vote on a candidate with the Trustees either approving or disapproving the selection. The fact that the Trustees never disapproved a selection resulted in the Department having a series of men serving one-year terms from 1898 to 1923, when William Walsh was elected to serve consecutive terms for 1923 and 1924. Walt Rutherford served as Chief for the calendar year 1925. He was succeeded by Walsh who served the year 1926, and as replaced by Omer Alley who served in 1927 and 1928.

During all this time the Trustees neither disapproved nor removed any person selected as Fire Chief by the members, nor did they ever request that a particular individual be elected. But this changed in November 1928, when the Department received a communication from the Trustees stating that they felt George C. Linn should be elected Fire Chief and Henry Schielke elected First Engineer.

They also indicated that the Trustees would be exercising their right to appoint the Fire Chief and First Engineer until further notice. Linn was duly elected as per the Trustees' wishes and served as Chief until June 1930. At that time he resigned and Omer Alley was named as his successor. Alley served until 1942.

Earlier in the year George Linn had been appointed to fill the unexpired term of Trustee Claussen who had resigned. In the past, several members of the Department had served on the Board of Trustees. During their terms of office they had been placed on the inactive list or resigned as members of the Department until their terms of office were over. Linn was the first and only person to serve in both capacities at once.

In January 1929, Chief Linn reported to the Council that at times the Department was having difficulty starting the fire engine. In his opinion, it needed an extensive overhaul. He was instructed by the Council to contact the Seagraves Company and get a full report on the unit's general condition. This was done by March with the results being the engine needed extensive repairs. The Council authorized the repairs to be made as soon as a replacement engine could be located to fill-in while the engine was down.

Before the work could be done, the Seagraves Company made an offer the City couldn't refuse. They would give the City \$1,000 trade-in on a new 500 GPM, triple-combination pumper at a cost of \$6,750. The balance would be paid in annual installments over the next five years. The Council eagerly accepted the offer and the 1929 Seagraves was delivered in November 1929. The strange thing of the whole event is that there was no mention of the new engine in the minutes of the volunteers' meetings through the entire year, except for one line in December which says "that at least three men must accompany the engine to the hydrant as the hose was harder to connect than the old one." The arrival of the new engine was

heralded in a two sentence announcement in the Personal and Local column of the Vacaville Reporter. It didn't even make the front page.

By the way, the old 1916 Seagraves wound up in the hands of the Lakeport Fire Department at Clear Lake and is still used as a parade piece. The new Seagraves served the Department for nearly 40 years before being taken out of service.

Despite the fact that Vacaville had suffered at least five conflagrations since its founding in 1851, no lives had been lost due to structure fires.

In July of 1899, 6-year-old Florence Singletary died as a result of burns received when her dress caught fire while she was playing with matches. Earlier she had been playing in Blum's Warehouse and it is thought that the severity of the fire was caused by sulphur dust that had permeated her clothing.

In July of 1919, 3-year-old Harry Pyle was apparently playing with matches in a small playhouse in his parents' backyard. When the fire started, panic apparently prevented him from saving himself. By the time his screams alerted the family it was too late. Two of Harry's brothers later

became volunteer firemen and served the Department for a combined total of 62 years. Fred served 37 years from 1932 until his death in 1969, and Edlef (Hatchet) from 1953 until his retirement in 1978.

Louis Zupo died in April 1929, of burns received in a fire two weeks earlier. He and his wife were about to get into their car when Mrs. Zupo remembered that the coal oil stove was still on. Mr. Zupo went into the house. Shortly after entering, an explosion occurred, setting the house on fire.

Eight months later, toward the end of November, Joseph D. Wren, one of the earlier residents of Vacaville, lost his life in an early morning fire in his home on Callen Street.

From time-to-time, in my research, I have come across instances where prominent members of the Department have disappeared from the roll call with no explanation as to why they left. One of these instances involves a person who had held the office of secretary-treasurer for several years. He wrote the minutes of the January 1930, meeting.

In February, G.C. Linn was appointed a committee of one by

the City Council to secure someone to audit the Fire Department books. There is a gap in the Department's minutes from January to June. At their June meeting the office of secretary-treasurer was declared vacant and Joseph Strauman was appointed to the position. In July a letter was received from the former secretary-treasurer demanding \$6 owed him. There was no further mention of the gentleman after that or the outcome of the audit.

The remainder of 1930 was very quiet as far as the Department was concerned, but there were several items of interest. The municipal election held in April of that year had a total turnout of 13 voters out of nearly 400 voters registered. Two of the three candidates for City Council received 13 votes while G.C. Linn received 12.

Measurable snow fell for the third time since 1915, and steps were taken to set up a numbering system for buildings in Vacaville.

G.C. Linn resigned as Fire Chief and Omer Alley was appointed by the Council as a replacement. Alley would serve continuously as Fire Chief until January 1942. The population of Vacaville totaled 1,561. This did not include about 265 people living in the Buck

Addition which is the present-day Kentucky, Peach Tree, and Magnolia Street area.

CHAPTER SIX

1931 - 1940

While the stock market crashed in 1929, the Depression did not really hit the country until the 1930s. Hard times would come to the country and Vacaville would be no exception. Near-riots, hunger marches, and labor strikes were frequent. Vacaville would see its share of the strife. Before things got better by the end of the decade the Fire Department would suffer, too.

The Depression did not stop large grass fires from occurring. In July 1931, another fire started in Mix Canyon and burned to Putah Creek. Some 100 sailors and Marines helped contain the fire, but it appears the fire was stopped only after it reached Putah Creek. It was described as 15 miles wide from east to west, and 10 miles long from north to south. The unusual thing about this fire was that apparently it burned from a southerly to northerly direction. Fires of this magnitude usually were pushed to the south by our strong north winds.

As an indication of how strapped the City was for money, neither the Department nor the City Council could come up with \$350 to buy a resuscitator. Two service clubs were able to raise nearly \$50 between them, but that was just about the limit.

The L.N. Curtis Company even

offered to place one with the Department to use for a period of one year on the condition that the Council sign a contract to buy it at that time. The Council refused to do so. As a matter of fact, the Department would not get this piece of equipment until 1946.

City employees also took their lumps. In February 1932, Omer Alley was serving as the city traffic officer and W.F. Hughes as the chief of police. Alley's pay was reduced from \$250 a month to \$200. At the April 29 meeting the City Council gave both jobs to Omer Alley and reduced his pay to \$150 a month. This was shortly raised to \$175. Alley agreed to furnish the gas and maintenance for his private vehicle to use in his official capacity.

By July 1932 the Council decided further cuts were necessary. The Department was ordered to make a survey of existing fire hydrants and eliminate all that were not absolutely necessary. At that time there were 39 hydrants in service, costing the City a rental fee of \$88.50 per month.

On August 5 the Fire Department reported that they had located six hydrants that they could eliminate without hampering firefighting abilities to any large degree. These hydrants were located at Callen and McClellan,

Main and Elizabeth, Main and Dobbins, Kendal between Bernard and Dobbins, Davis and Catherine and one of the school grounds. It seems strange these hydrants were chosen for elimination when all but one were in the downtown or heavily populated areas. At any rate, the recommendations were accepted and the hydrants ordered removed. The result was a savings of \$15 a month.

Over the years citizens have used unusual methods to notify the Fire Department that a fire had started. One of the most unusual happened in the early morning hours of July 1932. There was a trailer park in Town that had a store on or near the grounds. The store caught fire. Since there were very few, if any, people on the streets of Vacaville at four in the morning in those days, it got a good start.

An airmail pilot making a run from Sacramento to Oakland spotted the fire but could not land. He started to do a series of dives and power zooms at very low altitudes trying to get someone to wake up and turn in the alarm. A Mrs. Parks, who operated a service station across from the trailer park, finally turned in the alarm.

Things were not only financially bad for the City of Vacaville, but

because of the Depression the workers of the area were suffering too. At that time a pruners' strike was going on and feelings were running quite high on both sides. There were threats made that some of the buildings in Town owned by the fruit growers would be burned. Several fires occurred outside the City limits, but up to this time nothing suspicious happened inside the City limits. To be ready for any such incident, most of the members of the Department were on duty at the Fire Station each night of the week prior to December 2, 1932.

Things quieted down for a few days until December 14, 1932. At that time, about 25 members of the San Francisco Workers Ex-Servicemen's League came to Town to hold a parade and rally. There were some 200 strikers and sympathizers in attendance. The City did not want to cause a confrontation by stopping the event, but did make plans in case the situation got out of hand and turned into a riot -- which very well could have happened. Part of these plans included the Fire Department.

The Department responded to a fire at the Vacaville Inn just before 1 p.m. The fire turned out to be of no great significance, but instead of returning to the

station, the engine and crew parked at the corner of Main and Bernard Streets. A call was made to Dixon and they dispatched an engine and five men to standby with the Vacaville firemen. The plan was to have the firemen assist the law enforcement officers disperse the crowd with water streams if it became necessary. Luckily for the strikers, this action was not needed because that December was one of the coldest on record. There were 10 days in which the temperature dropped below 32 degrees. Another four days it dropped to 16 degrees and one day it got down to 19 degrees. On the 11th of December the high was only 32 degrees. Somebody would have been awful wet and cold.

Before we leave 1932, I might mention that in June of that year "Hatchet" Pyle and McKnight Brazelton graduated from high school. Hatchet was a star football, basketball, and baseball player while McKnight was student body president that year. Pyle served in the Fire Department for 25 years and Brazelton was a long-time member of the Fire District's Board of Commissioners.

In 1933 the Department was reduced in force to 15 active members. In the minutes of the volunteers' meetings, the reasons

for the reduction had to do with a new state insurance law. The City Council probably reduced the membership to save money as it had to insure each member of the Department. The level of membership would stay at 15 until March of 1938. At that time the Department was able to convince the Council that it might be cheaper to raise the membership to 20 men.

Because of the low number of firemen on the roster they were not always able to have a full 15-man turnout on fires. On occasion they had to have assistance from private citizens to pull and move hose, carry ladders, or perform other functions normally done by volunteers. The Department's position was that if one of these people were killed or injured, the City would be open to a large lawsuit that would cost much more than the insurance premiums for five more firemen. At any rate the Council went along with the request and granted the increase.

During this time period, the Department was able to carry on their roster four or five reserves called "social" or "extra" members. At the start of 1933, they were full-time members of the Department, but had to be dropped as active members. Their duties were very restricted. If

any of the active members resigned or were on extended sick leave, these reserves or extra members were placed on active duty.

Eventually, the roster of the active members was raised to above 30 and the number of "extra" members increased also. As time passed the reason for carrying extra members was forgotten by all but a very few. Even as late as the 1970s, if a person joined the volunteers, the minutes of the meeting in which he entered read that the person was accepted as an "extra." However, that person was a full-fledged member who had all the rights and responsibilities normally associated with the position. Since I joined the Department in 1963, I have never seen a roll call or membership list that separated the two.

Having these "extra" members also helped the Department have several championship softball teams in the late '30s and early '40s. Since these extras were allowed to participate in all social activities of the Department -- the criteria for becoming an extra member was often based on one's ability to hit and throw a softball. Most of these men never became active members, but there was one notable exception. Louis Mohr

became an extra member in 1938, primarily because of his athletic ability. He was accepted as an active member in 1939, and served the Department for 35 years until his retirement in 1974.

In 1934 the firemen tried a new method of raising funds by staging an event they called a "stag." In the beginning the participants bought a ticket for 49 cents. They would be served a turkey dinner, the Fire Chief would give his annual report of the past year's activities, and a guest speaker or two would address the group. After all this was over, the gambling tables were opened and the games began. Within a few years the amenities were dropped as was the requirement to buy tickets. The Department would sell chips that could be used to buy drinks, hamburgers, or to gamble with.

The Department made its money not on the selling of the chips, but on the cashing in or redemption of the chips on which there was a charge of ten percent. So if you attended one of these stags and bought say \$20 worth of chips, paid for your drinks and food and still came out with \$50 at the end of the evening, you would cash in the chips and receive \$40 making you a \$20 winner. The Department also kept the chips used to buy the

food and drinks, which increased their profit. These stags were so successful as fund-raisers that every Department in the County used them at one time or another. Vacaville had to stop theirs in 1958 due to a change in the City ordinance, but Dixon kept theirs going until the 1970s.

Another big push was made in 1935 to form a Rural Fire District and again nothing was done. However, the Suisun Fire District was formed that year when an election showed the people in favor of it by a vote of 124 to 7.

In May of 1937, a Dixon fireman, Charles Dietrich, was killed while responding to a fire at Camp Chester (a CCC camp) in the English Hills area north of Vacaville. This brought about an immediate order from the City Council that no City-owned equipment was to respond outside the City limits for any reason.

The Department, while understanding the reasons behind such instructions, was hard pressed to follow them. There were many homes within just a mile of the City limits. As a matter of fact, more than 200 families lived in the area known as the Buck Addition (Kentucky, Peach Tree, Magnolia, etc.) that was totally without fire protection. Just how long the

firemen followed the instructions is not documented, but if past history was any indication, it was not long before they slowly but surely started to ignore them. If memory serves me right, this was the third or fourth time that the Council had issued specific instructions not to respond outside the City limits.

November of 1937, also brought word that W.H. Moore, the first Fire Chief appointed by the City Council in 1895, died in San Francisco at the age of 77. Moore left Vacaville in 1908, and apparently never served in the fire service after that time. That same month the Solano County Firemen's Association was formed with Chief Omer Alley elected its first president. What was ironic about the Association was that even though it was called a "Firemen's" Association, nobody below the rank of Fire Chief or its equivalent held any office in it until the late 1970s.

On Christmas Day, 1937, a fire helped convince the City Council to raise the number of active firemen from 15 to 20. At about 1:30 in the afternoon the fire was discovered in the Crystal Block at the southwest corner of Main and Dobbins. The building housed two businesses: Art Dietz's Electrical and Plumbing Shop and Schaeffers Merchandise Store. The fire

caused \$40,000 loss to stock alone. No figures on the building damage were available. The cause of the fire was not determined. Two men fighting the fire, Nick Sardo and Harry Hargis, barely escaped death or serious injury when an accumulation of gas exploded in the back of the building as they were about to enter. Luckily, their injuries were not severe.

The year 1938 passed rather meekly, but on May 19, 1939, another large fire occurred. At about 2 a.m. Earl Brazelton, the town's night watchman and a member of the Fire Department, discovered a fire in the Akerly Building, at the northeast corner of Main and Dobbins. He turned in the alarm, but before the fire was out, it had caused some \$40,000 damage to the building and over \$100,000 damage to contents.

The building housed Pacific Telephone Company's switchboard, Dr. W.C. Jenny's Office, Collier's Hardware Store, and served as the Masons Temple. Everything in the building was lost and the building itself had to be torn down. Safeway built a new store there. Now in that area is Shock's Furniture Store and parking lot. The original building was built in 1906 by W.L. Schroeder and at the time of the fire, was owned by E.H. Uhl.

During this time the Department used, at no cost, the second floor of the Chandler building at the corner of Davis and Main as a meeting hall. A few months previous to this, they had received a letter from the owner, Mr. Azevedo. He was wondering about the possibility of the firemen paying rent for the use of the hall. The firemen wrote back inviting Mr. Azevedo to visit the Town and compare the condition of the building's present state to what it looked like when they moved in. Eventually, an agreement was reached to pay a rental fee of \$2.50 a month.

The Masons, homeless after being burned out of the Akerly Building, apparently made an offer to Azevedo that he couldn't refuse. In December, the Fire Department received notice that he had leased the building to the Masons and the building had to be vacated. Arrangements were made by 1940 to move the Department to the area now occupied by the Vacaville Reporter. This building would be home for several years, providing not only a meeting hall but an apparatus room for the engines.

Also in 1940, the Department was allowed to return to the old practice of electing their Fire Chief. This custom would continue technically until 1956.

Most of 1940 was quiet with Department members directing most of their energies to the task of remodeling their new home.

CHAPTER SEVEN

1941 - 1950

Before 1941 was over, the Japanese would bomb Pearl Harbor and the country would be at war. While the war would affect every community in the country to some degree, Vacaville would be forever changed. The Vacaville Fire Protection District would finally become a reality, the Department would get its fourth piece of motorized equipment in its nearly 50 years of existence, the firemen would lose at least part of their new home, and would come very close to having the first fireman killed in the line of duty.

Because of the threat of war, national defense was on the minds of everyone. At the April 4, 1941, meeting of the City Council, it was decided that another fire engine was needed for the area and the Fire District should receive a high priority. For several months there was a great deal of debate on what type of equipment was needed and how it would be paid for. Finally the details were worked out and the Council voted to buy the open-cab 1941 pumper the Department still has. The contract was given to the Van Pelt Company at Oakdale and the apparatus was received in October. Except for some lip service, action on the formation of the Fire District came to a standstill.

In 1941 the Department moved to the upstairs portion of what is now The Reporter building to use as a meeting hall. All of the apparatus was still stored at the old City Hall on East Main Street. On July 25, 1941, the City began negotiating for the purchase of the entire building to be used as a City Hall and serve as a permanent home for the Fire Department. Over the past years there had been discussions to present a bond issue to the voters to finance the construction of a new building. The project, however, did not gain much headway. This building could be purchased for only \$3,000 cash or for a total of \$3,712 over a ten-year period.

They finally decided to borrow the money to pay for the building with Rudy Werner, Joe Libonati, Joe Strauman, Walter Schaeffer and L.W. "Pop" Roulund cosigning the note. The note was paid off by establishing a building fund that received donations from groups and individuals and from rental fees paid by the City for office space. Rental fees were also paid by other groups and individuals for the use of various sections of the building. After paying off the note, the building's deed was signed over to the City. By mid-1947, the Department was forced to move its apparatus again.

At the time the building was bought, a portion of it housed Collier's Hardware Store. The space was somewhat limited and it was soon apparent that his business would have to be expanded. An agreement was reached whereby Mr. Collier would buy the building from the City. Part of the funds received from him would go to construct an addition to the old City Hall to house the apparatus.

Collier also agreed to let the firemen use the upstairs portion of the building for as long as was necessary for a meeting hall. The Department did not move out of this building until the new station at Dobbins and Kendal was built. The Department continued to use it for storage of some equipment and Christmas decorations as late as the 1960s.

The most interesting part of the entire building purchase affair is that negotiations for the purchase began on July 25, 1941. The rooms that would be used as the meeting hall were the same rooms used for the meeting on July 25, 1895, which resulted in the formation of the Fire Department.

In its 89-year history the Department has never suffered a fatality in the line of duty. There have been many close calls and some serious injuries, but none

resulted in the death of a Vacaville fireman. Probably the most serious injury occurred on the morning of September 11, 1941.

In April 1941, Frank Fadley, a night watchman for the City, was accepted as a volunteer in the Department. On September 11 at 4 a.m., a fire mysteriously started in the garage of Vincent Granucci's place near the highway east of Town. Fadley was one of several who responded from Vacaville to assist the Elmira Fire District. During the course of the fire, a 1,000-gallon gas tank exploded, throwing burning gasoline on Fadley, Tony Holdener and Donald Cripps of the Elmira Fire District, and two spectators from Marysville.

At first it was thought that Fadley had suffered the most serious injuries. However, before the month was out, the father from Marysville, David M. Dovell, died at the Yuba City Hospital. Fadley's injuries were serious enough to keep him hospitalized for many months and cause him to undergo several skin grafts before returning to work the first week of May 1943. In spite of these injuries, Frank returned to the Department and continued to serve as a volunteer until his retirement in 1960.

During the week of January 23, 1942, another fire occurred in the Crystal Building causing some \$33,000 damage. At this time the building housed the California Market, a four-lane bowling alley, and Collier's Hardware Store. After the fire, the California Market moved across the street to where Kappel and Kappel Real Estate is now located, the bowling alley did not re-open, and Collier rebuilt. This was the second time in less than two years that Collier's would be burned out. For those who may not remember, Collier's was later called Cranston's Hardware and stayed in business for many more years.

The remainder of 1942 and most of 1943 passed uneventfully. In November 1943 Barney Clark, a member of the Department since 1921, and Henry Schielke, a member since 1910, retired upon reaching mandatory retirement age.

If you remember, Henry Schielke was one of the men who had to resign in 1917 after taking the new fire engine for some unauthorized driver training. He was asked to re-join the Department in 1921 because of his hard work in assisting the Department on several fires. Schielke also served for many years as an assistant county fire warden.

Probably anyone who has lived in Vacaville either experienced or heard of the infamous "Black Thursday" of September 1965. Very few though recall the "Black Thursday" of 1943. A heavy north wind hit the entire state, causing damage into the millions of dollars.

A fire started west of Vacaville and before it was contained, burned an estimated 10,000 to 15,000 acres between here and Fairfield. Three ranch houses and barns were burned to the ground and some 1,000 sheep were killed. Even so, the dollar loss was not as bad as the fire in 1965. What's unique about this fire is that it occurred in mid-December!

During the war the FHA built several housing projects in Vacaville to ease the housing shortage caused by the expansion of Travis Air Force Base or Ragsdale Field, as it was called in those days. The first of these units, as they were called, was built on land just outside the City limits in an area bounded more or less by Merchant Street, Walnut Street, and Lovers Lane.

The second area built was on both sides of Dobbins Street, south of East Monte Vista, on the west side of Dobbins about where the City parking lot is now, and on the east side of Dobbins back to where the

Senior Citizens' building is now located. (Bernard Street used to run from Main to East Monte Vista and Kendal ran east behind the 500 block of Main but both were abandoned in 1944. By the way, in those days there was no bridge across Ulatis Creek and East Monte Vista from the creek westward was called North Street. That part of the street from the creek eastward was called Callen Street. The part of East Monte Vista that presently runs from I-80 to what is now Callen Street was known as Sacramento Street).

Since the second units were not built until 1944, and were inside the City limits, they caused no particular strain or problems for City services. Vaca Valley Acres, west of town, was a different matter, though. Some 600 people lived in this project and had a definite impact on the Town. The Fire Department was not allowed to take City equipment to fires there, under guidelines issued by the City Council.

Finally in May 1944, word was received from the FHA that they would pay the City for fire, police, and night watchman services, and use of the City dump, sewer flow, and maintenance. A sum of \$620 per year was to be paid to the City for fire protection. The City

immediately issued instructions to Chief Louis Pester to sound a general alarm for any fire in the project and that all available firemen were authorized to respond. This "windfall" resulted in the few City employees receiving raises of \$20-\$25 a month each, and salary of the Fire Department secretary increased from \$30 to \$50 per year. The Fire Chief, who up to this time had received nothing, was given a salary of \$100 per year.

For years the Department had realized the need for a resuscitator. Unfortunately, they had been unable to raise funds to buy one. In July 1945 they started another fund drive by putting up the first \$100 and appealed to the public for donations. They had originally planned to buy a single-bottle unit that ran approximately \$400. This time the response was so good that by the end of August they had raised more than \$650. This was enough to purchase the two-bottle unit they really wanted but did not think they could afford. The order was placed, and delivery was expected within 90 days.

The resuscitator was used for the first time at the Vacaville General Hospital when the one-hour-old son of Mr. and Mrs. Ervin Bettenhausen experienced breathing problems. Firemen

Warren Hughes, John Rico, and John Pine worked under the supervision of Dr. Henry Thelan. Gary Lee Bettenhausen is alive and well today as far as is known.

During my research for this project, I noticed that the people of Vacaville have come up with some great ideas for civic improvement and nearly all of them eventually came about. The problem is, it seems that once the seed had been planted it took nearly ten years for it to bear fruit.

As early as the mid 1880s, James McClain of the Vacaville Reporter editorialized about the need for a City-sponsored and directed Fire Department. We got it in 1895.

The Fire Department first asked for motorized pumping apparatus in 1906. We got it ten years later.

In 1936 the first mention of the need for a resuscitator was expressed. We got it in 1946.

A permanent home for the Fire Department was needed in 1946, and we got it in 1958.

The one idea that took so long to implement that it bordered on the ridiculous was the formation of a Fire District for the rural area. This subject was first talked about prior to World War I. The

Vacaville Fire Protection District finally became a reality in 1946, about 30 years later. The original idea was that the District would roughly encompass what is now the Elmira District, the Suisun Fire District, and the Vacaville Fire District. As it turned out, the Dixon, Suisun, and Elmira Fire Districts were formed long before Vacaville's.

In October 1945, petitions were circulated among farmers of the Vacaville area calling for the formation of a Fire District. The petitions would then be forwarded to the Solano County Board of Supervisors who would hold a hearing to determine whether sufficient opposition existed to stop such a movement. The Vacaville Reporter stated that the unusual number of fires in the rural area during the past few weeks spurred several farmers to take action which they hoped would result in the formation of the District and the purchase of appropriate equipment.

During the rest of the year all or most of the preliminary legal work was done. By the first of March 1946, the Board of Supervisors set March 29 as the date of the election that would determine the fate of the District. Named to serve as fire commissioners for the proposed District were Melbourne McCorry,

Louis Martell, George Kirbyson, Howard Rogers, and Howard Burton. The proposal for the Fire District passed by a margin of 89 to zip.

Now that the Fire District was formed and a Board of Commissioners named, the next task was to provide equipment and manpower. By May 31, 1946, the District took delivery of a used pumper from the East Vallejo Fire District which had been on loan from the Department of Forestry. This apparatus was equipped with a large water tank which caused it to soon be affectionately known as the "wine barrel."

Manpower for the new District was obtained in June when the Volunteers voted to respond to calls in the rural area using the newly purchased equipment. Problems soon developed and the following article appeared in the July 12 edition of the Vacaville Reporter:

"Any person interested in the operation of the fire engine of the Vacaville Fire Protection District is invited to attend the monthly drill session of the Vacaville Fire Department next Monday at 7:30 p.m. There have been instances where members of the Vacaville Fire Department who are now operating equipment cannot take the time to stay at a fire until it

has been extinguished. Therefore, additional engineers, who are not members of the local department, are sought to take over the operation of the equipment after it has been delivered to the fire by members of the Vacaville Department."

I'm not sure what the response was to this request, but I do know that until 1980 manpower for the District was provided by the City volunteers and even today most of the members of the District volunteers actually live within the City limits of Vacaville.

The shortcomings of the "wine barrel" were also pointed out during this week. A fire started in an area of Gates Canyon that was apparently too high for the engine to reach. As a result the firemen were forced to fight the fire with wet sacks and pack-guns. Fortunately, Jerome Wykoff had recently purchased a four-wheel drive jeep and volunteered to haul a supply of water to the firefighters. The performance of the jeep was so impressive that the Fire Department immediately began formulating plans to obtain something like it.

This time the "Rule of 10" did not come into play, and the Department was able to purchase a Dodge power wagon from Army Surplus by June 11, 1948, and

convert it into our first grass rig. Most of the work in converting the vehicle was done by Lou Rouland in his garage.

Probably every Fire Department will, in its history, have in its ranks an overzealous member who will assist the natural course of events by causing a few fires to start intentionally. Again, Vacaville was no exception. The culprit, who shall remain nameless because of his outstanding contributions to the fire service and the City of Vacaville prior to this incident and because of the possibility his relatives still live in the area, was found guilty of two misdemeanor counts of burning grass without a permit and throwing a burning substance from an automobile.

His penalty was a \$50 fine and six months probation, provided he did not return to the Fire Department for five years. He never returned as a member of the Department. Apparently his activities were discovered when he responded an engine to a grass fire before he was given the location.

From time-to-time, efforts were made to provide some type of uniform for members of the Department. Prior to January 1947 about all the uniform consisted of was a badge and cap. Apparently,

some type of uniform shirt existed in the 1880s, and much later, the members wore white duck trousers and white shirts for parades and special occasions. In late 1946 the members voted to buy a new uniform consisting of a navy blue long-sleeved wool shirt with large white buttons and navy blue pants. This uniform was used until the Department went to the white shirt and "Ike" jacket still worn by District volunteers.

It was also in 1947 that a committee was formed to work with the City Council to plan and construct a new Fire Hall. This building was finished and dedicated in 1958. The "Rule of 10" did not count in this instance as there had been talk since the early 1940s by the Planning Commission that a new city hall and fire station should be erected where Station One is now located. Eventually, the City took over the old administration building of Vaca Valley Acres. It served as City Hall until the present one was constructed.

In March of 1947, an agreement was reached by the City and the Rural District. It provided compensation to the City for the storage of rural equipment and the pay of City firemen on rural calls. Some of the highlights were the District would pay the City \$30 per month for each piece of rural

equipment stored on City property, the firemen would respond to District calls and be paid by the District at the same rate the City paid, City-owned equipment would be used on rural calls at the discretion of the Fire Chief and the City would be reimbursed at a rate of \$5 per hour with the number of equipment and men needed to be determined by the Fire Chief, and if rural equipment was used on City fires the City would pay the District back at the same rate. In addition the Vacaville Fire Department would receive \$10 per month for servicing rural equipment, with all expenses for repairs and maintenance paid by the District.

The District was required to carry compensation insurance for City firemen while they were on rural fires. A goodly portion of this agreement stayed in effect until the Department and District formally split in 1980. Some of it still exists today, but will be brought to an end when the District completes the new station on Vine Street.

This agreement also led to the joint-purchase of apparatus and equipment between the two agencies and eventually led to headaches for the early paid firemen, especially those who had not previously been members of

the volunteers.

The Department and District eventually became so entwined that four separate inventories of equipment were maintained. There was one for the City, one for the District, one for equipment and apparatus jointly owned by the two, and one for equipment and furnishings purchased from the treasury of the Volunteer Association. This does not include items owned by the FireBelles or individual members of the Department. Inventory time in those days was not a happy occasion.

The "Rule of 10" even affected the FireBelles organization. In May 1948, the firemen sanctioned the formation of a Women's Auxiliary and left the planning of the organization to the women. The group was finally formed in 1958. Apparently, the delay was caused by an outside factor and not the women's failure to act.

At their August 1948 meeting, the members voted to purchase two mobile radios to be installed in the rural trucks. Money for the purchase of the equipment had been donated to the Department and some of it was earned by the firemen through grass-burning. The first radio was installed before the end of the month and the unit was assigned the call

number 625. By this time, practically every Department in the county had at least one engine equipped with a radio.

About the only thing of significance that occurred in 1949 was a grass fire that started in Mix Canyon and burned north over two ridges for seven days to Miller Canyon. The most interesting aspect of this fire, besides its duration and direction of travel, was that it was the first time bulldozers were mentioned as being used to control the fire, in addition to the usual mutual aid from surrounding districts and Travis Air Force Base. Newspaper accounts indicate that three were used -- one each from Travis, Division of Forestry, and Solano County Road Department.

On March 20, 1950, one of the most expensive fires to occur since the 1880s happened when the Diamond Match Lumberyard caught fire. The flames, or at least the glow of the flames, could be seen more than 35 miles. The fire resulted in a loss of more than \$200,000. A cabinet full of records and an adding machine were the only items saved. Thirty days after the fire was thought extinguished, a pile of roofing paper ignited. The same pile of roofing paper had stubbornly resisted the efforts of the

firemen for hours during the original fire. And, after thousands of gallons of water had been poured on the fire, it was believed out. It apparently had been smoldering all that time.

Throughout my research for this writing, I tried to find out what became of the Department's early equipment. We know that the first motor-driven pumper was eventually sold to the Lakeport Fire Department and still exists today. In September of 1946, the 1925 Chevrolet was sold to Frank Libonati for \$25. The Department was eventually able to reclaim it through the efforts of David McCready.

There are still two hose carts and a ladder wagon unaccounted for. The last time the hose carts were mentioned anywhere was in the minutes of the volunteer meetings somewhere in 1917 or 1918. At that time one of them was placed back into service as a supplement to the new fire engine at the request of the Pacific Board of Fire Underwriters.

There is no mention later as to when it was taken out of service or what happened to it. The only information I have on their fate is from Warren Hughes. He remembers one being sold to the Uhl Ranch where it was disassembled and the spokes used

to provide handles for pruning shears and other tools. It's too bad at least one of the hose carts and the ladder wagon were not retained by the City or the Department.

CHAPTER EIGHT

1951 - 1960

During the 1950s, the City of Vacaville experienced a period of growth that no one thought possible just a few years back. In June 1950, the population of Vacaville was officially set at 3,169. By June 1960, the official tabulation showed the Town to have 10,848 residents. The assessed valuation of the City in 1950 was an estimated 1.5 million and by 1960 climbed to \$10 million.

The City Council approved a record City budget of \$971,999 for the Fiscal Year 1959-60 as compared to \$214,975 in 1954-55. In just ten short years, the Town tripled the growth experienced in its first 100 years of existence. For good or bad, the sleepy little village of Vacaville was gone.

Perhaps symbolic of this passing was the death of J.C. Duncan who died in 1951 at age 84. Jack, as he was known by the residents of Vacaville, came here in 1888. He first tried farming. Within a short time, however, he gave it up and with Grant Perry built a livery stable. He was also associated with Matt Steward in the undertaking business for some 30 years, drove the town taxi, and drove the school bus between Elmira and Vacaville for 28 years. Jack became a volunteer fireman sometime prior to 1904. During that time he served both as

Foreman and Fire Chief before his retirement in 1916 at age 50.

The growth and changes in the City also caused growth and changes in the Fire Department. Most of the traditions and activities carried on today, especially by the District volunteers, got started in this decade. No doubt some will disagree with me, but it seems to me that the 30 years between 1950 and 1980 were, all things considered, the best years to serve in the Vacaville Fire Department.

The Fire District was barely five years old in 1951, and already there were rumblings of discontent from those who lived in the northern area of the District. The main problem seemed to be the response time. All the volunteers and equipment were stationed in Vacaville, and depending upon the location of the fire, the availability of firemen, condition of the roads, and other contributing factors, the response times were often 30 minutes or more.

In July 1951, a meeting was held to find a solution. Several suggestions were discussed. One of them was to withdraw from the Vacaville Fire District and become affiliated with the Winters Fire District. Another

was to pay the Winters Fire District for services rendered. It was similar to an agreement already in existence between the Dixon Fire District and Winters Fire District. The third was to form an auxiliary volunteer group in that area. All three suggestions had merit but also presented their own set of problems. Because the area set in Solano County and Winters was in Yolo County, legal problems would arise. Lack of money would be the main problem in paying the Winters District to cover the area and that, along with lack of available manpower, would preclude alternative number three from being implemented immediately.

However, by 1961 these two problems were overcome to the point that the District purchased a 1948 International truck from the Division of Forestry. Through volunteer efforts, it was converted to a 500 GPM pumper. The population of the area had increased to the point that at least a minimal amount of manpower was available and the Olive-Pleasants Auxiliary to the Vacaville Fire District was in business under the direction of Chief Dan Pedde.

There was still a problem of housing the equipment. There was no money available to build any type of station. Therefore, for

many years the pumper was stationed at several of the volunteers' ranches. In most cases it was left unsheltered.

I can recall that through the '60s and early '70s, in late winter or early spring, a power-wagon would be sent to Olive-Pleasants and their pumper brought back to Vacaville. The paid firemen would then strip the apparatus, clean and wax it, paint the diamond deck, remove and wash the hose, clean the equipment, and re-load the whole thing. The truck would be given a lube job, oil change, tune-up, and then sent back to Olive-Pleasants for another year. With our other duties the whole process took about two weeks. We often wondered if anything was ever done in the way of maintenance the rest of the year.

All of this has changed in the past several years. The Department now has a two-bay station and five pieces of equipment. It has its own rank structure, a training program, and all the modern equipment the District can afford to provide. Nearly all the maintenance is done by the members. Even though some of the apparatus must still be left outside, it is protected as well as possible from the elements. Hopefully, the present station can be expanded when the District's main station on Vine Street is

completed. This auxiliary is a definite asset to the Fire District. Its members can be proud of the progress made over the past few years.

Over the years the Department has had several members who abruptly quit the Department and some who dropped out of sight mysteriously. Eventually, all were located with one exception. One evening Dan Pede, a chicken rancher and first Fire Chief of the Olive-Pleasants Department, disappeared. He was last seen at Markeley Cove and was reportedly on his way home. He never arrived there.

There are several areas between the Cove and Pede's ranch where a vehicle could leave the road and land in very deep water. It has happened many times before and since, but in all known cases, there has been some evidence that an accident occurred. In this case, nothing was ever found.

In addition to having an unknown sum of cash, Pede also had his checkbook and credit cards. No check was ever cashed or credit card used and his car has never been sold. Short of draining Lake Berryessa and/or Solano Lake, it is very doubtful that Pede will ever be found.

Even though the Solano County Firemen's Association had been in

existence since 1937, it did not hold its first county-wide Field Day until May 11, 1952, in Dixon. Originally, these Field Days were held not only to provide competition between the departments in various events, but to demonstrate to the public the different services provided by a Fire Department. Sometimes during these demonstrations, things would go wrong that at times provided comic relief and at other times came close to causing serious injuries.

I remember one time a local department (not from Vacaville) was to demonstrate the extinguishment of some type of fire. They had elected to use an open-cab pumper. Because it was a very hot day, and the engineer did not figure to be involved in actual firefighting, he elected not to wear his turnouts. Big mistake. In his eagerness to show his department's abilities he parked too close to the fire which had been allowed to get a good start. After getting out of the pumper he realized there was too much heat from the fire for him to get his job done.

Luckily, a backup unit was provided at all these events. It was immediately pressed into action, giving the luckless engineer time to move his apparatus to a cooler location.

I doubt that Gil Richardson, retired Solano County Fire Warden, will ever completely forgive the Vacaville Fire Department for this one. At the Field Day held in Vallejo in 1964 or 1965, we were to demonstrate salvage operations following a small but very smoky fire. Sometime earlier, someone had obtained what was supposed to be a smoke grenade from Travis Air Force Base. Now, being a Korean War veteran, any round object with a pin, release handle, and yellow letters "W.P." indicated to me it was a White Phosphorus grenade, but no one listened.

At any rate, it was decided to use this "smoke grenade" for effect. Gil Richardson had been using a butane set-up to start previous fires. Not realizing that we did not want a real fire, only smoke, he started to push the rod into the room just as the "smoke grenade" detonated. Luckily for him, what few pieces came out the window did not embed in him, but did ruin a shirt and he received some painful burns.

It was also in 1952 that the first fire trails were cut in the Blue Ridge Mountains. In order to familiarize the firemen of the County with the trails, the first Jeep Ride was organized. In the beginning, these rides were not only practical, but a fun outing.

Each Jeep carried its own liquid refreshments and a few of the men also carried sidearms, which were ostensibly to be used to kill rattlesnakes encountered. At the halfway point Warren Hughes, Gil Richardson, and a few others would have a barbecue set up and lunch would be served.

Unfortunately, by the late 1960s the participants were putting too much emphasis on liquid refreshments and guns. It finally got to the point where several accidents occurred and the shots fired sounded like a small war was going on.

Naturally, changes had to be made for safety's sake, but to me they were a little drastic. Most of the accidents I recall involved guests and not the firemen themselves. To me the guns should have been banned, along with non-firemen. At any rate, the jeep rides still exist, but participation has dropped off.

At about 3:30 a.m. in late May 1954, the City again came close to losing the south side of Main Street from Bernard to the bridge. The fire started in the basement of one of the buildings and took two hours to control. If you have been in one of these basements, you can understand why. Three of the businesses were damaged to the tune of some \$40,000.

At the Solano County Field Day of 1954, a Make and Break team consisting of Dave McCready, Louis Mohr, Hatchet Pyle, and Howard Wood Sr. took first place for the second consecutive year, setting a Department and county-wide record. This record would stand until 1973 when Gary Robinson, Gary Laqua, Robin Wood, and Howard Wood Jr. (two sons of Howard Wood Sr.) broke it.

Another first occurred during the week of July 23, 1954, when Robert Meyer, by a 3 to 2 vote of the Vacaville City Council, was selected as the first City Administrator. Mr. Meyer was selected from more than 15 other candidates, almost all of whom were assistant city managers of other towns. At the time he was serving as manager of the Imperial Gas Company of Vacaville. At that time there were about 35 City employees, but Mr. Meyer would have absolutely no control over the Fire Department.

At its January 1955 meeting, the City Council agreed with the Fire Department that the continued growth of the community necessitated planning Fire Department improvements, especially in the areas of equipment and a fire station. By February Chief Warren Hughes, acting under instruction of the Mayor, appointed three

committees to work on the project. The membership of the committees consisted of members of the City Council, the Fire Department, and the District Board of Fire Commissioners.

The new Equipment Committee was composed of Frank Libonati, Howard Rogers Jr., Warren Hughes, and Walter Hanzel. The Building Committee was composed of James Marshall, Harry Talbot Jr., Etheal Gilley, and Howard Burton. Finding financing to purchase new equipment and to construct a new building was the chore of Joe Libonati, Al Porter, and J.M. Brazelton Jr. The City Administrator, Bob Meyer, was appointed secretary of all of the groups.

By April of 1955, the contract was let for the construction of a new fire engine to the Van Pelt Company. This engine was to be a 750 GPM pumper built on a 1955 GMC chassis. It was the largest, not only in size but in pumping capacity, put into service up to that time. The apparatus was delivered on September 2, 1955, at a cost of \$17,000 which was shared equally by the City and the Fire District.

This unit was one of the best that money could buy in those days, but it was a hog to drive. I understand that some of our smaller members

would have to brace one leg against the dashboard in order to make some of the tighter turns. Even some of us taller firemen had to sit on our turnout coats and helmets in order to see over the dash. But, old 421 served the Department for more than 20 years. Eventually the unit was taken over by the Fire District and the pumping components transferred to a Ford chassis. The unit, now known as 3925, is still in service as this is written.

The results of the Building Committee's activities would be very apparent by the end of 1957.

In June of 1956, the City Administrator presented the City Council with a record budget of \$307,213. Included in that budget was a proposal to hire the first full-time paid Fire Chief for the Fire Department. In August the Council announced that G. Warren Hughes had been named the first Fire Chief and would assume his new job on August 16. His salary was \$400 per month. By the way, the budget for the Fire Department that fiscal year was \$32,173, including Chief Hughes' salary and benefits.

Meanwhile, the new Fire Station Building Committee had not been idle. By September it had advertised for bids on the construction, but received only

one. At \$63,481 that bid was judged to be too high. Rather than re-advertise, the Council authorized Chief Hughes to prepare a building program for construction by volunteer labor, for the most part, with some specialized work to be done by local contractors. An appeal was made to the citizens to help in anyway they could. If they could not help with the work, they could donate food, soft drinks, and beer to feed those who could.

And, answer the appeal they did. Work on the building started with the clearing of the site. By February, concrete was being poured. By December, the building was completed at a cost to the City of \$46,000. Volunteer labor came not only from the members of the Department but from local service clubs. On the day the roof went up, the Rotary Club was working on one side and the Lions Club on the other. Altogether more than 3,000 man-hours of work were volunteered. On work days, the crews were fed. Chief Hughes reported that not one dime was spent on food that entire year. It all came from donations.

On the morning of January 5, the Department officially moved into its first permanent home. That afternoon they responded to their first call from the new station. It turned out to be a smoke scare at

the Herman Basherini residence on Vine Street.

All of this was accomplished in spite of that summer being an extremely hot one. The firemen kept busy not only with many small fires, but several large ones. On September 6, 1957, the Vacaville Reporter stated that the fire in the Mt. Vaca area that had started the previous Monday, was controlled after burning about 7,000 acres in four days. This was the third fire that took 72 hours or more to control. It was also the first fire I found where air tankers were employed in fighting the fire.

According to the Vacaville Reporter, six planes belonging to a crop-dusting company were used to ferry water between the Nut Tree Airport and the fire. Each plane carried from 120 to 200 gallons of water and the operation continued for three hours, from 4 p.m. to 7 p.m., apparently on the day the fire was controlled.

In spite of the conflagrations of the 1870s and 1880s and the many structure fires that occurred before and after, only four citizens died as a result of burns within the City limits. On the morning of September 19, 1958, a fire would claim the lives of three children.

Shortly after 2 a.m., a fire was reported at the corner of Stevenson and Boyd Streets. Of the 11 or 12 persons occupying the house at the time, 3 of them -- Lorna Underwood, 11; Sheila Callison, 3; and Jimmy Callison, 5 -- were unable to escape. Investigators believe the fire was caused by a penny placed behind a fuse which in turn caused an electrical short. What they could not determine was why -- with so many adults present and some apparently still awake when the fire started -- these three children were not removed to safety. According to newspaper accounts of the fire, a great many conflicting statements were made. Only the survivors will ever know what happened that night.

The dollar losses during 1958 were remarkably low despite the fire mentioned previously and one other structure fire. Until the evening of December 28, losses amounted to only a couple of thousand dollars. On that Monday, after Chief Hughes had just put the finishing touches on his annual report to the City Council, he had to spend all Tuesday revising it.

At a little after 9 that evening, smoke was reported coming from the 100' x 250' West Coast Van and Storage building located on Mason Street near Interstate 80.

By the time the fire was out about \$215,000 damage was done. Included in the loss were the entire household furnishing of some 75 families and the Sproutz Reitz Store's entire stock of merchandise, stored there before its new building on Main Street was completed.

Gambling has been a very popular activity in Vacaville, probably since the area was first settled. Since 1934 the Fire Department had practically supported itself from the proceeds of its annual stag. The beginning of the end came in 1953, when the City Council passed a no-gambling ordinance. The stags continued through 1957 and plans were being made for the 1958 stag when word was received from the City Council that this violation could no longer be overlooked. A lot of pressure must have come from somewhere, because several members of the Council regularly attended and participated in these events. Many people think that the buck stews were started at that time to replace the stags, but they had started several years earlier as a "thank you" to other Solano County Fire Departments, service groups, and individuals who helped the Department during the previous year.

Since the advent of the auto, City Fire Chiefs have continually

warned firemen about speeding while enroute to the station to answer an alarm. Luckily, no accidents have caused serious injuries or death. The first accident occurred in February of 1959. The alarm for a fire on Birch Street was turned in. The late Tony Lombardi was headed north on Dobbins Street approaching the intersection at Main. At the same time Lt. Joe Lopez (then a patrolman) was headed east on Main Street to the Police Station to pick up another officer and return him to Dobbins and Main for traffic control. They arrived at the intersection at the same time. In the resulting collision, Lombardi was thrown from his vehicle and came to rest against the curb. He suffered a chipped elbow and many bruises. Lopez's injuries were less serious. Apparently, Lombardi's car hit Lopez's which then struck a vehicle owned by John Engle that was parked in front of what is now Shocks. Engle's vehicle then slammed a pickup owned by Joseph Nailor. Damage to Engle's car was estimated at \$200, but Nailor's damage was negligible. Overall, it was a very spectacular accident, but luckily not nearly as serious as it could have been. Needless-to-say, a great deal of caution was exercised by both departments for the next several months.

In 1958, 1959, and 1960, three organizations were formed, two of them within the Fire Department. In April 1958, the Women's Auxiliary to the Fire Department was formed. Elected to serve as the first officers of the FireBelles were Catherine (Fred) Pyle, president; Clara (Warren) Hughes, vice-president; and Dorothy (Jack) Sherman, secretary-treasurer. Over the years many organizations have provided support to the Fire Department, but none as continuous or intense as the FireBelles.

In the days when the Department packed candy for the Children's Christmas Show, they were there to help. Since the Food for the Needy Program was initiated, they have provided workers needed to keep the program going. They have baked cakes, washed cars, and served dinners to raise money, most of which was donated to the Fire Department. They spent many hours at the Firehouse -- especially during campaign fires. They provided food, drink, cigarettes, and other items needed by the firemen working the fire with no more pay than the grateful "thank yous" of the men battling the fire. The community in general has also benefited from the labor of these women. They have donated time and money to many charitable activities. For

years they maintained a supply of food and clothing -- not to mention cash -- to assist families whose homes were devastated by fire. These women have a lot to be proud of. Those of us who have benefited from their existence will be eternally grateful.

In April of 1959, the Vacaville City Employees' Association was born. Twenty-eight of the some 30 employees attended the organizational meeting. For years this group was the bargaining agent for all City employees, as well as a social organization. Elected as the first officers of the group were Mike Rico, president; Julian DeGracia, vice-president; Pearl Walters, secretary; and Marie Guilds, treasurer. Elected to the Board of Directors were C.H. Dunham, Joe Lopez, Manual Perez, Ruth Breaker, and Howard Wood.

The Junior Fire Department was formed in July 1960, under the supervision of James Patton. Patton later became a paid firefighter for the City and served as advisor to the group for many years. First officers of the group were Tim Kashuba, foreman; Leonard Kashuba, first assistant foreman; and James Volstedt, second assistant foreman. Many of the young men who joined this group have gone on to be volunteer

and paid firefighters, not only in Vacaville but with other agencies. Several of them are now officers with various paid fire departments. While they are prohibited from actual firefighting activities, the junior firemen have been invaluable in assisting the Fire Department in a myriad of ways.

Our first "official" full-time, paid firefighter was hired in 1959. I use the word official because there is some confusion concerning who was actually first. At the time Donald Powell was hired in 1959, another employee was working at the Fire Department. However, that employee, Frank Fadley, is listed in personnel records as a utility worker. In fact, when Jimmie McCants was hired to replace Fadley on his retirement in April of 1960, he, too, was listed as a utility worker for the first several months. I was told by several sources including Jimmie, that Fadley performed the same duties, wore the same uniform, and worked the same hours as everyone else. So, I leave it to others to decide who was actually first.

During my research I came across an article in the Vacaville Reporter concerning Father William Travers who had just been assigned to Travis Air Force

Base as a Chaplain. Father Travers served for many years as the unofficial chaplain of the Vacaville Fire Department and the official chaplain of the Solano County Firemen's Association. He was a gregarious, bear of a man. When not adorned with the robes of a priest, he did not fit the image most of us have of those in the profession. At any rate, the January 2, 1959, edition of the Reporter gives us a side of Father Travers we did not know about. While serving with the Air Force in Odelyhousen, Germany, in 1955 he risked his life to aid two soldiers who were trapped under a 280 mm cannon. For his actions Father Travers was awarded the Soldier's Medal.

This was not, however, the first time Father Travers had risked his life to save others. While serving at Taegu during the Korean War, Father Travers received a Bronze Star for rescuing two crewmen from a downed B-29 before it burned. He's truly a remarkable man who would have made a great fireman.

CHAPTER NINE

1961 - 1970

The 1960s would see the most significant changes in the makeup of the Vacaville Fire Department to date. From 1960 to 1971 the Department would grow from a paid force of one Fire Chief and three firemen to eighteen firemen headed by the Fire Chief, and this would be the beginning of the end of the City Volunteers. It would be another twenty years, however, before the Town would relinquish the concept completely and go to a full-paid Department. That subject will be dealt with in the next chapter.

Three fires that occurred in this decade will long be remembered in Vacaville. The first claimed the life of one person following a double homicide; the second was a large grass fire that burned from the northern section of English Hills into the Town of Vacaville; and the third was a residential fire that claimed the lives of four of the seven members of the Freeman family.

On the morning of September 12, 1963, a rare but spectacular thunderstorm rattled over Vacaville. At about 9:30 a.m., the Department received a report that lightning struck a house on El Camino and it was on fire. When the first crews arrived, they found that the fire was at 711 Alamo Drive, the home of T/Sgt. and Mrs. Pedro Montano. The house

was fully involved and a body was sprawled across the window sill of the front bedroom. Because of the condition of the body, nearly everyone mistakenly thought it was a mannequin. The fire was very intense and very difficult to knockdown. It was only afterwards that they found out why.

Once the fire was knocked down, and crews could start mop-up operations, the scene they found was like something from another world. Mounds of clothing and bedding were piled everywhere. All of it had been saturated with huge amounts of flammable liquids. Lee Kloppenburg, a volunteer, went to move what he thought was a burned chair to extinguish some embers. The "chair" turned out to be the body of Henry White, ex-husband of Georgia. Still, with the exception of the flammable liquids, there was nothing to indicate that the incident was anything more than a house fire in which two people were killed.

Later in the day, Doug DeFilippis and Don Barty were extinguishing smoldering embers in the master bedroom. As they removed the large amounts of bedding and clothing from the bed, they found the body of Pedro Montano. Because of the bedding, the fire had been unable to reach the body

and it was very apparent that Montano did not die from the result of the fire, but from a gunshot wound in the head! An autopsy showed that Henry White had also died from a gunshot wound to the head.

Exactly what happened prior to the fire will never be known. After piecing together evidence at the scene, and information supplied by friends, relatives, and neighbors, police theorize that the scenario went something like this: Because of domestic problems and financial considerations, Mrs. Montano planned to burn the house and it can be assumed she planned to kill her husband Pedro sometime in the future, but not especially on the day the event took place.

Sometime during the night before the fire, Mr. Montano killed two or more of Georgia's poodles. This was apparently the last straw for her. Some say she loved her dogs more than anyone or thing in the world, and they were the children she never had.

She apparently waited until Pedro had gone to sleep and then shot him. Either before or after she did this, she suffocated the remaining dogs in plastic bags and placed them in an area she felt was safe from the fire. She then went about preparing to burn the house.

In the meantime, her ex-husband, Henry White of Brentwood, arrived to take her to see her mother -- something that Pedro would not do. Her relations with her ex-husband were still good, as his presence would indicate. His arrival, however, complicated her plan. As he stood in the family room, Georgia shot him in the head with the same small-caliber gun she had used to kill Pedro.

She then soaked Pedro's bed, Henry's body, and the rest of the house with the flammable liquids that she had been accumulating for the past weeks. The containers she didn't use, she placed on tables, chairs, and counters around the house with the tops removed. She was in the front bedroom when the explosion occurred, blowing the windows out and shoving the house off the foundation. Although her clothes and hair were burned off, neighbors reported hearing her screams before she finally died sprawled across the window sill. Did the fumes from the flammable liquids ignite from one of the pilot lights in the house? Who knows? Some think they were ignited by a bolt of lightning sent by God to punish her for her deeds.

While most fires are taken quite seriously by firemen and especially so by the victims of the fire, we occasionally run into

one that can be considered quite funny. One such fire occurred May 14, 1964. Just before noon on that day we received word that smoke was coming from the old A-1 Roofing building located on the east side of McClellan near the intersection of East Main Street. The building was originally a fruit-packing shed and consisted mostly of a large open warehouse-type room. Since the fire, or at least the smoke, appeared to be coming from the middle or back end of the building, we first tried to make entry there but could not. We found out later that all the doors were barred by large planks.

After entering we found several rows of cases labeled "Coca-Cola Syrup", along the right side of the building on fire, along with material around what looked like a large feed hopper turned upside down. On top of the cases were several one-gallon bottles filled with a clear liquid. While we were trying to extinguish the cardboard cases, some of the bottles were knocked over and broken, producing the prettiest blue flame I had ever seen. Most of us still did not know what we were dealing with until either Don Barty or Ernie Oliver walked in and declared it was the biggest still they had ever seen.

The inverted feed hopper turned

out to be a 400-gallon still for making moonshine. The making of illegal hooch had been a popular pastime in Vacaville since the 1800s. Of all the stills found over the years, though, none came close to the capacity of this one. Apparently the man who was operating the still knew he was in trouble the minute it blew, and fled the scene immediately. Among the things we found at the fire were a sandwich with one or two bites taken out of it, and a still-hot cup of coffee.

Vacaville has experienced several conflagrations that came close to wiping out the Town. Most of these fires occurred prior to the turn of the century. In modern times the closest we have come to a conflagration will long be remembered as "Black Thursday," which occurred September 16, 1965. As bad as it was, only a combination of luck and a great deal of effort prevented this fire from being far worse.

While the fire that threatened Vacaville started at approximately 12:30 p.m. in the English Hills area, "Black Thursday" actually started early that morning with fires being fought by Solano County firemen from Dixon to the Peabody-Vanden Road area. Some Vacaville units were still in the Vanden Road area helping with mop-up when the fire

in English Hills, approximately eight miles north of Vacaville, was reported. Some crews had already been on the fireline for nearly five hours when the call came in.

That morning had dawned with a strong north wind blowing in the 50-60 MPH range. The temperature would reach a high of 92 degrees. That summer had been a scorcher. The grass was tall and tinder dry, just waiting for any kind of spark.

For English Hills and Vacaville, "Black Thursday" started at approximately 12:30 p.m. when wind-beaten power lines fell to the ground, igniting the grass. In just three hours, the head of the fire reached Monte Vista Avenue and then Interstate 80 before it could be contained. In the meantime, it would cover about 8,500 acres, destroy some 15 homes and 45 other structures such as barns and sheds, and kill a great many head of cattle, horses, and sheep. Miraculously, no one was killed or seriously injured. Mutual aid was requested almost immediately, and eventually, more than 100 pieces of fire apparatus were manned by about 200 to 300 firemen fighting the blaze. Due to the many negative factors involved, firefighters could really do little but try to stay ahead of the fire and protect any structures before the fire reached

them. There were no natural barriers wide enough to make a stand.

The luck I mentioned came in the form of a previous incident. A few months earlier we had a grass fire that burned an area some 100 to 200 yards wide from Vine Street to Markham Heights. This burned area prevented the fire from coming into what was then the Scoggins Lane and Brown Street area, and causing the possible loss of more houses.

Ten years and two weeks after the City's first multiple deaths by fire, tragedy struck again. This time it claimed the lives of four members of the Francis Freeman family. The fire occurred a little before midnight on October 4, 1968, at the family residence located at 201 Juniper Street. Perishing in the fire were Mr. Freeman and his wife Mary, and two daughters, Theresa, 16, and Julia Ann, 6. Barely escaping the fire was a son, Jimmie, 12. Two other daughters were out of town at the time of the tragedy. Most of what we know about the events prior to the fire came to us from Jimmie.

The Freemans after visiting with friends, returned home between 9:30 and 10:00 p.m. Mr. Freeman apparently retired to the family room to watch television. Mrs.

Freeman first checked on Jimmie and Julia Ann and then returned to the living room. Jimmie stated that some time later, he smelled smoke and went into the hall where he met Julia. Both of them then made their way down the hall to the master bedroom, but their parents were not there. They then made their way back down the hallway to find their parents. By this time, the smoke and heat were becoming unbearable.

Jimmie stated that when he got to the living room, his father was fighting the fire by the stereo and Julia was behind him. Jimmie then ran to the front door. By this time, the door knob was so hot that he could barely hold on to turn it.

In those days the stations were manned by two paid men and a sleeper at each station. When reports of a structure fire came in, the plectrons were sounded. Duty crews were required to wait until help arrived before responding. Don Barty and Robert Nelson were on duty that night.

Bob Powell and I were the first two to arrive and the engine responded. On our arrival, we found the family room and kitchen heavily involved. The first line was taken to the kitchen window. A second unit arrived immediately after the first, and a second line was taken to the back of the house

and the fire was attacked through the windows of the family room. We had been alerted to the fact that there were people still in the house. The fire had gained such headway that the swamp-cooler on the roof of the house had fallen through.

Contrary to Jimmie's statements, Mr. Freeman's body was found in the family room and Mrs. Freeman's body in the living room. The garage had been remodeled so that it contained two bedrooms and a storage room. Theresa's body was found in one of the bedrooms. Julia apparently left her brother's side and returned to the master bedroom where her body was found. Why she returned we will never know. Perhaps it was to save the family pet who died next to her.

The '60s were not all fires and tragedy, though, there were a great many good times. These were the days of Howard Wood, Jack Sherman, Jerry Pena, Louis Mohr, Ed Weyrens, and many more who played hard and worked hard. Sam's Club in those days was almost a satellite station. Seldom could you enter the place and not find at least one, and usually several, off-duty paid or volunteer firemen. Being at the back door of Sam's when the fire alarm went off could be very dangerous, especially on a

Saturday or Sunday afternoon.

Sometimes we were lucky and Ed Fadley or Wilbur Riehl would be there and everyone would pile into their Jeeps. Other times, we would have to run from there to the station. Several parties and barbecues were given throughout the year, with the FireBelles sponsoring some and the firemen sponsoring others. Participation in social events and work parties rarely dropped below 90 percent.

In late 1963, Louis Mohr came up with the idea of having an annual bowling tournament among the different fire departments of Solano County. Vacaville, Fairfield, Vallejo, and Rio Vista had bowling alleys then and the plan was to move the tournament each year with the town's department hosting the event. Trophies were to be given for first, second, and third place, high series, and high game.

The first tournament also turned out to be the last. It was held in Vacaville in January 1964. The turnout was larger than expected with some departments entering more than one team. Vacaville had two teams and would have had a third, but a heavy snowstorm in the Placerville area caused some of our members who worked for PG&E, to be called to work in that area. We moved some of our

second team members up to the first team and replaced them with members of the third team.

To say we did well would be an understatement. The first team took first place, the second team took third place and Doug DeFilippis walked away with the high game trophy. If I remember right, it was Ernie Oliver who won the high series trophy, leaving only second place to some unremembered department. Maybe that's the reason the tournament was never held again.

Over the years the Department used several methods of notifying personnel when the report of a fire was received. Most of the time this was done by use of a fire bell and in later years by a town siren. In 1962 the Department entered the electronic age and plectrons were issued to all members. A few of these were "Chiefs" models equipped with a selector switch so that they could be set for tone activation or constant monitoring and were issued to the officers.

The remainder were "Sentry" models that did not have a squelch and were tone-activated only. However, they did have a reset button that could be placed in the "manual" mode, which meant that traffic could be monitored until the re-set button was pushed.

There was one major drawback in using this method of monitoring the radio after it was activated. Because no squelch was provided with a set, a great deal of static usually issued from it when there was no traffic, a fact that caused a great deal of arguments between the firemen and their wives.

Since the first Fiesta Days celebration was held back in 1958, the Fire Department has provided the manpower needed to organize the parade. Most of the members wore some type of western wear on parade day, but there was no set uniform. On April 8, 1963, Louis Mohr made a motion, seconded by Jimmie McCants, that a committee be formed to look into the possibility of this oversight being corrected. At the May meeting, the committee of Tony Lombardi, Howard Wood, and Warren Hughes suggested that a uniform consisting of a cowboy hat, red western-style shirt, and wheat-colored Levis be adopted. This suggestion was approved and a motion was made by Louis Mohr, seconded by Doug DeFilippis, that the Department buy the uniform for each member. The motion passed.

For many years the Department had been availing itself of the services offered by the California State Training Program. Under

this program the State sent an instructor to teach courses in basic firemanship to any department at no cost. The courses ranged from Strategy and Tactics, to Pump Operation and Salvage and Overhaul. They were great for what they were designed for, but there was another need crying to be filled. That need was for some type of program in which a degree could be earned by those wishing to make the fire service a career.

After a great many months of pleading, politicking, and probably even a little threatening, Solano Community College (then known as Vallejo Junior College) was finally convinced that such a program would be worthwhile. If it didn't work out at least the college would get the fire service off its back. The college even agreed to hold the class off-campus and give it on a shift-basis.

On September 14, 1967, the first class was held at the old Fairfield Fire Station on Jackson Street. That course, "Strategy and Tactics," was taught by Charley Harper of the Fairfield Fire Department. Three college credits were given for completion of the course. At first, only one class a semester was offered in fire science, but it was not long before this was expanded to two

and even three classes per semester. There was still a problem in obtaining a degree, though, because of the academic courses required. Through the efforts of the Fire Science Advisory Board, the college was convinced to offer some of these courses on a shift basis or at least allow firemen to combine night courses with those offered during the day to full-time students.

From its humble beginnings, this program has now grown to the point that the Fire Science Department is the most popular and well attended program at the college. The Vacaville Fire Department can take a great deal of credit for the success. Nearly 75 percent of the present and past employees of the Department have received their A.A. or A.S. degrees in Fire Science through Solano College. Several members of the volunteer department have also received degrees. Of those who have not yet earned their degrees, most are working toward that end.

Prior to this decade the City of Vacaville had been pretty slow about purchasing motorized pumping apparatus. We got our first one in 1916, the second in 1941, and the third in 1955, which was a joint purchase between the City and the Fire District. In the ten years between

1960 and 1970, our fleet would be doubled. In 1960, a 1,000 GPM pumper built by Van Pelt on a Ford chassis, was delivered. An almost identical twin to this unit was delivered in 1965.

On March 11, 1970, we took delivery of our first diesel-powered pumper, a 1,000 GPM "Pioneer" model built by American LaFrance. Usually the company would send a man with each unit it delivered to teach the firemen how to operate it and to mount the various pieces of equipment that would be carried on it according to the department's specifications.

For some reason or other, probably to save money, it was decided that we would do the work ourselves. Because of this, the unit was not placed into service until early summer. When it was ready, the first response made was to a mutual aid request in Berkeley Hills for a grass fire. In keeping with the Department policy in those days, only two men -- myself and Gary Robinson -- were sent with the unit. Luckily by the time we got there, the fire was under control and there was little for us to do except for some mop-up.

In May 1966, Station Two was finally opened. While we were all elated about the Department

growing to the point where another station was needed, a lot of us were not exactly thrilled about being stationed there. The main cause for this feeling was the lack of action. In those days we had less than 200 calls per year and by far the largest percentage was in Station One's area. To give you an idea of the number of responses made from there Bob Nelson and I were stationed there from October to December one year. In that three-month period we did not make one response until 7:30 in the morning of the last day we were assigned and that was a false alarm at the Nut Tree. The other shift might have made a few responses, but there was not a whole lot of red ink used in the daily log.

After nearly 40 years of service, the 1929 Seagraves was officially taken out of service in January 1968. This old unit, once the pride and joy of Vacaville, finally got to the point that parts were extremely difficult to locate. The last mechanical damage it suffered was in the transfer case. No parts were available and to have the parts handmade would have been extremely expensive.

Unofficially, the rig had been out of service a couple of years prior to that. Oh, it was still checked every day and had its weekly road

test just like the newer pumpers, but no one took it to a fire unless they absolutely had to. It was equipped with mechanical brakes that would lock up if too much pressure was applied and was very difficult to turn. Backing it up the ramp into the fire house was next to impossible unless you had a lot of experience. Once you got it moving up the ramp, you couldn't stop or slow down or the thing would start bucking and jumping like a wild horse.

There was also a problem with starting. The rig just would not start unless the choke was used. But, if the choke was used too much, it would flood the carburetor to the point that gas -- sometimes copious amounts of gas -- would spill on the floor. This happened to Steve Seidell and Stan Rice one day and it caught fire. Luckily, they got the fire out before any damage was done. Since they both continued to work here for some time after the incident, I don't think Chief Hughes ever heard about it. He may not have fired them, but none of us who were there at the time would have taken odds on it not happening. How were we to know that Chief Hughes would retire in 1971 without having fired anyone.

CHAPTER TEN

1971 - 1980

The decade of the 70s, especially the last few years, would probably be the most tumultuous of any in the Department's history. There were fires that in terms of monetary cost would be larger than the City had ever seen before. And, five members of one family would lose their lives in a residential fire. New equipment and programs would be added that would cause the Department to grow at a rate never before anticipated. This growth eventually lead to an end to the volunteer firefighter in the City of Vacaville, and the establishment of a fully-paid Department.

Earlier in this book, I lamented about the lack of clear and concise records of the early history. Now I find that my generation is just as guilty. I am specifically referring to the formation of the Vacaville Firefighters' Association. Existing records show that an organizational meeting was held February 19, 1971. Those of us there at the time know that sometime prior to that date, a letter was drafted and delivered to Fire Chief Hughes and City Manager Walter Graham outlining our intentions, but no one kept a copy of it.

Minutes of the February meeting also indicate that a committee

had been formed previously to draw up a constitution and bylaws. No one can remember when this was done or who served on the committee. Regardless, the constitution and bylaws were adopted and officers elected. Bob Powell, now the Fire Chief, was elected president; Don Barty, vice president; and Clarence McDaniel, secretary-treasurer. Elected to serve with these officers on the board of directors were Gerald Skinner and Robert Nelson.

Prior to 1971 the Department had responded to first aid and resuscitator calls on a routine basis, but never transported victims to hospitals. This service had always been provided by a private ambulance service or friends or relatives of the victim. Then in 1967 the City Council voted to purchase two station wagons in lieu of regular patrol cars and equip them with gurneys, first-aid kits, and resuscitators.

In addition, two more police officers were hired to ease the increased workload. For the first time these dual-purpose vehicles gave to the citizens of Vacaville reliable, fast transportation to a hospital. In 1971 this service was transferred to the Fire Department.

Along with the transfer came an increase in the quality of care to

the citizens of Vacaville. This does not mean that the Police Department did not give its best. They did an excellent job with the equipment and training provided. But, they had to make do with station wagons while we were given a regular, modern ambulance. Their training consisted of advanced first aid while Fire Department personnel were required to complete an 84-hour course and certify as Emergency Medical Technicians.

On the day the ambulance was placed into service, we were all a bit apprehensive. None of us had been in a position like this before. Bob Powell, Pete Marino, and Don Barty were scheduled to work the ambulance that day. The first call to come in was an auto accident on Interstate 80. Not only was the crew's medical skills tested that day, but also their ingenuity.

As it turned out the driver, and lone occupant of the vehicle, was a man weighing more than 400 pounds. Although we had been provided with the best equipment money could buy, I don't think that to this day, a portable gurney has been made to accommodate a person that size. Complicating matters, was the fact that a previous amputation had left the man with only one leg. Getting the man from the car to the ambulance and from the

ambulance into the emergency room at the hospital created a bigger problem than treating his injuries.

Finally, a large wooden door was obtained from the City Corporation Yard. With the assistance of several bystanders and highway patrolmen, the mission was completed. Except for the seriousness of the injuries of future victims, we figured that anything after that had to be a piece of cake.

Even though it was sorely needed, the City of Vacaville had been without a hospital for years. Several efforts were made to have one established, but they came to naught. In spite of the work done by the Police and Fire Departments, lives were being lost and injuries and illnesses were being complicated by the delay in patients receiving hospital care. The service had to be upgraded, and the best way to do it was to establish a paramedic program. But, a paramedic program was expensive and to finance it, the citizens were asked to support a special property tax to raise the money. On November 2, 1976, the people voted for the increase by a margin of three or four to one.

Brian Lopez, Gene Gantt, Tony Ramos, and Lynn Norman entered

the paramedic training class at Stanford University in February 1977. By July of that year, Vacaville became one of the first in Northern California to have a paramedic service, and in all probability, the smallest town to do so. A great deal of the credit for the success of this program should go to these first four men. Because the Department had to cover three shifts with four men, a great deal of responsibility was laid on them until the Department could hire three more paramedics in early 1978. If anyone of them had failed the course or quit their job it would have been a major setback. If two did, it would have been disastrous.

During the decade of 1971-1981, the position of Fire Chief would change hands three times. Back in 1941 G. Warren Hughes was elected by the membership of the Department. In December 1946 he was elected as Fire Chief of the volunteers and held the post until appointed as the first full-time Fire Chief in 1956. On September 30, 1971, having reached the mandatory retirement age, he was replaced by Howard "Woody" Wood, Sr., who had joined the Department in 1951. Wood became eligible for retirement in 1979, and did so on April 6 of that year.

He was replaced by Dale Geldert, who had been serving as a

battalion chief with the Inglewood Fire Department in Southern California. He was the first, and so far, only person from outside the Department to be named Chief of the Vacaville Fire Department. His tenure lasted until December 1981, when he was succeeded by Robert A. Powell. Powell had joined the Department as a volunteer in February 1964, and became a paid member of the Department in August 1965. Through the years he worked his way up the ladder to become the first Fire Chief from the ranks of the paid Department.

Money for the operation of the Volunteer Fire Department has been in short supply, even back to 1890 when Vacaville Volunteer Hose Company No. 1 was formed. In an effort to raise money to buy equipment the Company sponsored Firemen's Balls from 1890 to 1892. These dances, as well as enthusiasm for the Company, declined for the next five years. The City Council re-organized the Department in 1895, and provided financial help. As usual though, there was never quite enough money supplied by the City. To augment these funds, the Department again turned to Firemen's Balls as a source of income.

Judging from articles in the Vacaville Reporter these dances

were held three years running, from 1897 to 1899, but were sporadic to 1909, with two being held in 1907. Apparently, the Department went to sponsoring carnivals and later to the stag parties to raise funds.

When a City ordinance stopped the stag parties in the late '50s, no annual fund-raising event was held. The Department raised money through other special projects, such as control burns and work parties. Then in 1974 the idea of having a Firemen's Ball was resurrected and has been a profit-making venture ever since. It is now hosted by the volunteers of the Vacaville Fire District.

Grass fires, particularly in the Blue Ridge area, have always been a real problem for firefighters of the District and the County. In the early days, fires starting in these areas were allowed to burn themselves out, which sometimes took weeks. As the area became more populated and the damage caused by fire grew, farmers and volunteers from the towns started fighting the fires as best they could by using shovels and wet burlap bags.

Firefighting became easier with the introduction of bulldozers to cut fire trails, and aircraft to drop fire retardant chemicals. By the late 1950s every department

in the County had at least one four-wheel drive vehicle. These vehicles, along with the acquisition of large trucks to carry water to the fire, by comparison, made grass firefighting almost easy. "Campaign" fires were cut to two or three days duration. Further improvements in communication and the California Division of Forestry's assistance were so effective that by the late 1970s, fires lasting more than 24 hours are practically unheard of in Solano County. No doubt, the future will bring more large fire with heavy losses, but at least now we are better prepared to cope with the situation.

While Vacaville may or may not have been the first to obtain four-wheel drive units for firefighting in Solano County, they were certainly the most prolific. Through the efforts of Chief Wood, John Schroedel, and the County Fire Warden's Office, the Department began accumulating three-quarter ton power wagons from military surplus. With what little money was available, water tanks were fabricated, pumps and hose were purchased, and the power wagons converted to firefighting units.

By far the greatest amount of labor provided in converting these units came from the on-duty paid

personnel of the Department, which caused some internal problems. Some members of both the paid and volunteer departments considered these units to be little more than junk. And, to some extent that was true. Very rarely did we go through a fire without at least one -- and sometimes more -- breakdown. All the equipment was used; some of it very used. In spite of the breakdowns, these units proved their worth time and time again.

Sure, it would have been nice to purchase new, commercially built equipment, but the money just wasn't there. For many years there was a saying around the Department that if budget requests were made in September, instead of March or April, we would be up to our eyeballs in money and equipment, and it's true. Like the military, the fire service is never truly appreciated until there is a war, or in our case, a fire.

In 1980 a modern-day record in fire losses would be set with the occurrence of two fires. Damage caused by these two fires would total over \$1 million. A third fire would be even more devastating; it would take the lives of five of the six members of the Raoul Isias family.

The first fire happened on

February 9, 1980, at 3:10 a.m. and caused about \$250,000 damage at Padan School in south Vacaville. The building was heavily involved when the first units arrived. An investigation showed that flammable liquids had been poured on the floor of the library and ignited. The fire then spread to other areas of the building.

This was the second fire to have been set at the school. A few weeks earlier another suspicious fire had been set in the teachers' lounge. Damage to the building at this time was limited to the room of origin and to an administrative office. No suspects were ever arrested. They may have also been responsible for an even more damaging fire at the Will C. Wood Junior High School located in the same part of town.

The Will C. Wood fire was reported July 13, 1980, at 1:50 a.m. Again, the fire was heavily involved when the first units arrived. An investigation showed the fire, suspicious in nature, started in the principal's office and spread through the attic to the library and three other classrooms. The fire was difficult to fight due to a variety of factors. One of these was the fact that the fire started in a wing at the north side of the complex, making it necessary to hand-lay lines some 300 to 400 feet.

Another factor was the construction of the building. The entire north side was a solid wall with no openings. All doors and windows were on the south side. A roof overhang supported by beams from the attic had been provided for sun and rain protection. When the fire burned the supports in the attic, the whole contraption collapsed like a door, cutting off the access to the rooms. The firemen lost a great deal of time getting to the fire because of the collapse. Damage caused by this fire exceeded \$750,000 and would have been much larger were it not for a strong southwest wind blowing that night. It kept the flames away from the other wings.

Sometime prior to the morning of August 3, 1980, Mr. and Mrs. Jesus Ponce of 372 Elsinore Drive left Town on an extended vacation, as they frequently did. During these absences, their daughter, Aurora and her husband Raoul Isias, would often bring their four children to stay a few days at the home. These visits served two purposes: not only would the Ponces have a reliable house-sitter to make minor repairs and keep the yard in good shape, but the Isiases could, for a few days, escape the hustle and bustle of the Bay Area.

On the 3rd of August at 3:33 a.m. the Department received word

that the two-story house located at 372 Elsinore was on fire and that people were trapped inside. Once the fire had been knocked down, firefighters found that Raoul and Aurora Isias, along with their children, Petra, 4; Betra, 2; and Cecilia, 5 months, had all perished in the fire. Only five-year-old Carmen survived.

Witnesses report that Raoul, after carrying the child to safety, re-entered the house in a vain attempt to rescue the rest of the family. The cause of the fire was blamed on an electrical malfunction in the television set.

Back in 1908, the Department took delivery of its first hook and ladder "truck". This vehicle was a hand-drawn wagon designed to carry ladders, fire extinguishers, and other firefighting equipment. It would serve the Department until sometime around 1916, when it was replaced, along with the two hose carts, by the Department's first motor driven pumper.

In 1980 we got our second ladder truck, an 85-foot Van Pelt High Ranger. It was built in 1967 for the Central Fire Protection District of Santa Clara County. The unit would cost some \$80,000 and included a six-month guarantee on parts and labor. In addition to that, a man was sent

from the Central Fire Protection District to teach a cadre of firefighters how to operate and maintain the unit.

By 1979 events would begin to take place that would end the use of volunteer firefighters within the City of Vacaville. By then the paid Department had grown to a point where there were very few times that the volunteers were needed. About the only time volunteers got a chance to actually fight a fire and utilize their skills was on fires outside the City limits or on subsequent alarms when the paid men were tied up on the first call.

This situation created resentment between the two groups. The volunteers felt they were being pushed aside and under-utilized. The paid men saw the volunteers as a threat to job security and growth of the Department. This is not to mean that every volunteer or paid man felt this way. They didn't. But, there were enough on each side of the question that problems, some petty and some valid, existed.

Given time, and the absence of outside agitation, most of these problems could and would have been resolved. No doubt the two groups would have split and reorganized as they now are, but it would not have come so soon

and the transition would have been easier.

A great deal could be written about the situation that existed between mid-1979 and late 1981. The relationship between the Vacaville and Elmira departments, which prior to that time had been an outstanding example of friendship and cooperation, deteriorated rapidly. Charges and counter-charges were made almost on a daily basis. The situation degenerated to the point that elements of the two groups almost came to blows during a Fiesta Days Parade.

Since 1981 the relationship between the two departments has improved to the point that they co-exist in nearly the same manner as they had many years before. Today, the less said about it, the better.

On August 16, 1981, Howard Wood Jr. became the first full-time paid Assistant Chief of the Vacaville Rural Fire District. Three months later Dale Geldert submitted his resignation as Chief of the Vacaville Fire District, and Wood was named to replace him. Shortly afterward, on December 16, 1981, Robert Powell became the fourth paid Fire Chief for the City of Vacaville and the re-organization became official.

The volunteer department that had served the City of Vacaville for 86 years had come to an end and it began a new era of service to the Vacaville Fire District. The City now has a fully-paid Department.

At about the same time an agreement was reached between the Commissioners of the Fire District and Howard Wood Sr., whereby a one-acre plot of land would be donated to the District to build a fire station. In 1982 the pad was cut, and in 1983 the actual construction of the building began. In spite of unnecessary delays caused by absurd demands of Solano County officials, work on the building progressed to the point that on January 2, 1985, members of the Vacaville Rural Fire District moved in lock, stock, and barrel to begin operations.

The separation should be a good thing for both organizations. Not many volunteer groups are as lucky as the Vacaville Volunteers. Usually when a community grows to the point that an all-paid department is needed, the volunteers are simply disbanded and passed by the wayside. Here they have a new home, their own equipment, and have room to grow and still keep the traditions of the past.

The paid Department now has the

opportunity to establish its own traditions and to grow professionally. Even though its roots go back nearly 100 years and many of the paid personnel also served as volunteers, they now have a new, separate identity that is just barely three years old.

I wish the best of luck to both organizations.

THE END FOR THE OLD -

THE BEGINNING FOR THE NEW